



# Hide n' Seek

A Gravity Falls/Pinecest fic

By Doublepines and  
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*A Gravity Falls, Pinecest fic*

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epub complied by **Azdaema** as part of the **Pinecest Archive** project

## Part 1

Dipper's eyes snap open. With a shaky breath, he bolts upright in his bed with a hand over his rapidly beating heart. He wipes the sweat from his brow, blinking as he takes in his surroundings. Wood. Mold. Dirty laundry. Books. Random toys and objects. Another bed cot across from his, Mabel bundled under the covers. She rolls over, and his heart stills.

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuckity fuck.

"...Ma-Mabel?"

He stares at his sister, squinting in the dim moonlight that spills into the room. He waits until he hears her snore, and lets out a sigh of relief.

She was sleeping. Thank God. She was asleep and didn't hear...

Dipper hops out of bed, quietly maneuvering past everything littering the floor, and picking up a pair of boxers on his way to the door. The wooden stairs of the Mystery Shack creak as he practically runs down from the attic. He prays no one wakes up. Prays no one pops up to ask him why he's up so late, or why he's holding an extra pair of underwear. Also, Dipper prays that he doesn't get any splinters in his feet. He should have put on some house shoes.

The night air is cold, and he's starting to feel sticky. His stomach turns. An unsettling feeling washes over him, but he quickly pushes it down and sprints into the bathroom. The tiled floor is freezing, making the thirteen-year-old hiss as he hurries to the small rug in front of the sink.

He sighs, rubbing his tired eyes.

"Just a stupid dream. No need to look into it," he mumbles to himself, mentally repeating the words over and over like a mantra.

He avoids looking at his reflection when he turns the knob on the sink. He peels off his underwear, a dark spot staining the front. Gathering up the thin, broken pieces of the soap bar, he scrubs away the evidence before tossing the damp cloth into the tiny hamper in the corner of the room. Not up for actually

taking a shower, Dipper grabs the first wash cloth he sees and cleans himself up at the sink. He wipes below his belly button, and on his inner thighs. He blushes as he wipes his tip clean. He then spies a red heart sewn into the rag, his face becoming hotter as it dawns on him that this is *Mabel's* wash cloth. He twitches in his hand, flashes from his dream popping into his brain. A tingle spreads all over him, goosebumps rising on his skin. Uh oh.

Dipper drops the rag, kicking it over to the hamper in a panic. His breaths become ragged, his mind spinning as he yanks on his assumedly clean boxers.

No. No no no no no.

He shakes his head, desperately trying to take deep, calming breaths. It was just a dumb dream. It didn't *mean* anything. People have dreams like *that* about relatives all the time. He researched it after the second time this happened. He is *not* developing some kind of sick crush on his sister.

He's just... he's just spending too much time with her is all. Yeah, that made sense. They need some time apart. His mind is just latching on to Mabel because she's literally the first and last thing he sees everyday since they've returned to Gravity Falls. Yeah, that's why. No deeper meaning to it. And all the butterflies in his stomach, the heart racing, and the tingling warmth that spreads through him when they're together didn't mean anything either. All of that was just a byproduct of the dreams.

Dipper yawns. He makes his way back up to his and Mabel's room. He doesn't look at his sister as he eases into bed. Or rather, he tries not to look at her. But eventually his eyes find their way to her sleeping form. He can't really see her, but takes comfort in seeing the slight movement that comes with every breath she takes. Lying in bed, he watches his sister sleep in near darkness. He blinks sleepily after a few minutes, looking down at the dark outlines of the kites they made earlier that day. They're suppose to have a day of kite flying and adventure tomorrow, but... Dipper sighs, bundling himself deeper into the covers.

The distant sound of a wolf howl enters the attic. A smile captures Dipper's lips, remembering last year when a chorus of howling had woken them. The howls had sounded close by, but they didn't see anything when they looked out the window.

“Invisible wolves?” Mabel had guessed when she looked away from the window to glance at her befuddled brother.

“Maybe,” Dipper shrugged, flipping through his book to no avail. “Could be ghosts or whatever.”

Pretty much anything was possible in Gravity Falls. The howls grew louder and louder, until it sounded like a pack of wild dogs were inside the Shack. But then the sounds faded without any answers to their inquiries. It left the twins pretty shaken, and Dipper isn’t sure which of them had casually suggested it, but they ended up cuddled together in his bed.

Now, Mabel giggles in her sleep. “Oh, Dipper.”

Heat rushes to his cheeks. Dipper rolls over so he’s no longer facing her. His heart pounds against his chest, her voice chuckling out his name ringing in his ears. She’s... dreaming about him?

He grabs the end of the pillow he’s not laying on, folding it over his red face. He lets out a frustrated groan and sighs.

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“Aw, Dipper. C’mon. We were gonna fly our kites together,” Mabel pouts, waving her yellow kite in his face. “Can’t you hang with Wendy after?”

Dipper glances at the dirt on his sneakers, silently shaking his head. Bailing on her like this feels kind of crappy, but they can’t hang today. He just can’t take it, and he wish she would just let it go already.

She takes hold of his hand, and his head snaps up. She smiles brightly, tingling his insides and making his heart skip a beat. Dipper frowns, pulling his hand away. Her warmth lingers on his skin, his palm itching to be against hers again. Ugh.

“Geez, Mabel. We can’t spend every freaking second together! We’re always around each other! It’s weird! Give me some *fucking space*!”

Mabel’s eyes widen, her mouth dropping, before her face hardens into an icy glare. “Fine! Have all the space you want you... you... jerk-faced jerk! I’ll fly kites by myself!”

She huffs, storming out of the Shack.

There's less and less righteous fury with every step she takes further away from the Shack, but even so, Mabel keeps marching, her black flats crushing through any leaves or grass or bugs that are unfortunate enough to be in her path.

It's probably stupid of her to be headed deeper into the woods when her goal is to actually get her kite in the air. Oh well. This is the direction she picked when she stomped out of sight, so this is the direction she's going. Dipper wants space; oh, she'll give him space. So much space that she won't have to see his giant dumb head for the rest of the day.

What was his problem, anyway? He'd seemed so excited last night, when they'd both laid down to sleep with the promise of some quality kite-flyin' time in the morning. It had practically been his idea to make the kites in the first place! Well, sort of. With some expert inception on her part. And they'd had so much fun yesterday making them together... sitting on the living room floor, surrounded by construction paper and pipe cleaners and markers and glitter glue, Tigerfist playing in the background, just talking and laughing and being silly. Whereas she had just sort of winged the creative process as usual, Dipper had meticulously followed the dusty how-to book they'd found amongst all the junk in the attic, fussing in that classic Dipper way when he couldn't get the sticks to line up right, or his patch of fabric would rip and he'd have to start all over... it was pretty cute to watch, actually.

When she'd started to snigger at him, his response was to pinch some glitter between his fingers and shower it over her head with a snarky, "What are you laughing at, Mabelangelo?" As was typical with the twins, a full out crafts war had broken out between them; ending with google eyes and sequins glued all over each others' clothes, a crudely drawn goatee scribbled onto Mabel's chin, the words 'call me dooper' scrawled across Dipper's forehead in pink marker, and a lot, a lot of laughter.

True, Stan hadn't been very happy with his great-niece and nephew when he'd stumbled across the scene and eyed all the glitter and gunk stuck in the carpet. Though once everything was cleaned up, the siblings were pleasantly surprised to realize they'd ended up with two relatively neat and very flyable-looking kites, one red, one yellow. Her yellow one being totally more jazzed out than his red, of course. But hey, crafty stuff didn't come as easily to her brother,

and he definitely deserved an ‘A’ for effort.

A soft smile comes to the barely teenaged girl’s face. Those were the kind of hangouts she loved to have with Dipper the most; when it’s just him and her, with no one else around to kick in his oh-no-I-have-to-be-cool receptors, and he’s not trying to be anything more than the big nerd she knows and loves.

Man, he’s such a dork, Mabel thinks, giggling inwardly. A big, sweet, adorable dork—endless crazy conspiracy theories, anal-retentive attention to detail, horribly loud tuba playing, extra sweaty hands n’ all.

She blinks suddenly, squinting and pursing her lips.

Wait a sec. Gosh darn it, isn’t she supposed to be mad at him right now? Obviously, if her pink cheeks are any indication, she’s not doing a very good job of it.

But... she should be. After all, what did she ever do to warrant him lashing out at her like that, out of the blue? The potty mouth is kind of a recent thing with him, and she’s okay with it, but—he’s never cursed directly at her before, and it kind of scared her. And—and telling her they’re spending too much time together? That being around her all the time is weird? What does that even mean?

By now all her anger has pretty much drained away. But the initial hurt she’d felt when she turned her back on him earlier—the type of hurt that made her heart sink and her lip quiver—is starting to sink back in, creeping out from her chest to the tips of her fingers and toes.

This isn’t the first time she’s gotten caught in the crossfire of one of her brother’s lame angsty-teenage-boy mood swings. So why is this time upsetting her so much more than the others?

Okay, maybe she’s not completely in the dark as to the reason why. Maybe it might possibly be because it seems like all she’s really wanted to do lately is hold his hand, hang out with him, have him include her in one of his obsessive little video investigations... throw a fluffy blanket around the two of them and form a big, cuddly cocoon while watching fuzzy old movies on VHS in Stan’s lumpy armchair...

And was it a little strange for her to be getting this attached to her twin bro? Mabel feels her cheeks go pinker. Sort of. Maybe? Honestly, she tries not to think about it too hard. But Dipper wasn't wrong. So far this summer, they'd been spending practically all their time with each other, whether amongst friends or just the two of them.

It never occurred to her that this was a bad thing, though. She never got the feeling that Dipper was ever annoyed with her constant company; in fact, the vibes she got from him suggested quite the opposite, much to her delight.

Until today, that is.

Now, apparently he thinks it's weird. Now, he's yelling at her, basically telling her to get lost, ditching her in favor of hanging out with Wendy, leaving a hollow feeling in her chest.

She feebly kicks a rock along her path, her defiant marching long since faded into more of a shuffle.

After being lost in her thoughts for quite a while, Mabel suddenly stops, taking in her surroundings for a moment or two before realizing she's doesn't recognize this area of the forest. Instinctively, her hands retreat into the sleeves of her sweater. Aw, geez—she'd walked so far she doesn't even know where she is anymore.

Shaking off her initial heebie-jeebies at the possibility of being lost, she lifts the sweater-covered hand that's not holding her kite to her mouth, thinking hard. What was it Dipper always said to do when you're lost in the woods? Look for... mossy rocks? Helpful direction giving squirrels? She chuckles to herself for a second, distracted. No, no, wait. She's can almost hear her brother's know-it-all voice telling her she's supposed to be looking for a stream so she can follow it, or something. Yeah, that sounds right.

Resolved in her plan, Mabel turns around and attempts to start backtracking, keeping an eye out for water as she walks.

An electric blue butterfly flutters over her shoulder, hovering in the air around her, and a happy smile spreads across her face. "Ooh, hey there little guy," she greets warmly, extending out a welcoming finger just in time for it to dart out of her reach. It flies around her head, causing her to twist around in her



quest to keep her eyes on it. She follows the colorful creature around absentmindedly for awhile, humming out the tune of a song from her most current teen idol, before taking a sharp turn and coming to an abrupt halt at the sight before her. Her voice trails off, eyes going wide.

“Whoa...”

Ahead of her lies a quiet clearing. Several fallen tree trunks poke out of the long grass that blankets the area, the soft goldenrod blades swaying gently in the breeze as more butterflies flutter about. A calm silence seems to permeate the air here. The sudden lack of usual forest sounds might have unnerved some, but all Mabel sees is the perfect space for kite flying.

Automatically her feet start forward, a grin plastered on her lips. She can find her way back later; she’s in no hurry, and technically this is what she came out here for anyway, right?

Holding up her glittering kite against the sun, Mabel addresses it sternly. “Alright, bub. Time to prove yourself. For kites everywhere! Huzzah!”

And then she’s off, quickly gathering speed and letting her kite trail in the air behind her on a short string. The thirteen-year-old laughs with joyful exhilaration as the grass tickles at her bare knees. She loosens the string and turns her head to glance back at her yellow creation; sure enough, it’s catching the breeze and beginning its flighty ascent into the perfectly clear sky above. A whoop and a holler happily burst forth from her lungs while she continues to cut through the clearing at full speed, nearing the middle.



The hurt she was feeling only moments ago is has completely drained from her body. Who cares if Dipper ditched her? He's the one missing out, anyway! Because the sun is warm on her shoulders and her hair, the light is catching the glitter on her kite flawlessly and making it shine bright golden against the vast blue background, and—and man, when's the last time she felt this carefree?

Her left foot comes down again from a particularly elated stride, disappearing into the grass, expecting to meet with solid ground again but none comes. She barely has time to swap her giggles for a startled shriek before tall grass and dirt are swallowing her up into what quickly becomes blinding darkness, and she's falling into nothingness, screaming and helplessly gripping the string in her hands for dear life.

Above ground, the white string continues to quickly unravel, dragging the fallen kite along until it unexpectedly snaps off, vanishing from sight and leaving its yellow companion behind.

Once again tranquil silence falls over the clearing. An electric blue butterfly

flies indifferently over a trodden patch of grass that is slowly righting itself again; soon the only evidence that anyone ever stepped foot in this place is a broken kite, the wind still catching the edges, gently pushing it back towards the trees.

## Part 2

Okay, ow.

Mabel groans, pain shooting through her stiff body as she sits up on her sore bottom. She tilts her head back, looking up at the tiny sunbeams glittering down the hole she just fell from. Well, that could've been worse.

Mabel eases on her feet, dusting off her pink sweater and the back of her skirt. Her eyes then fall on tiny bones littering the mossy dirt.

Much worse.

"Hmm," Mabel hums, looking back up again. She taps her chin, her free hand touching the wall of dirt in front of her. It's too smooth. She can't climb it. Maybe she could jump up though?

Mabel takes a few steps back before hurdling forward, knees bending, she leaps up, hands out like cat claws, ready to stick her landing... and she smacks into the wall. She slides down, falling over on her butt once again.

"Blargh."

Mabel squeezes her eyes shut as the pain in her tailbone shots up her spine. Googly moogly, you'd think this moss would have cushioned the fall more.

"Are ya alright there?" a sweet southern drawl comes out of nowhere. Mabel jumps up, opening her eyes to meet four blue ones gazing right at her in the shadows ahead. The four eyed creature gasps, slinking forward on eight legs into the flecks of sunlight. Mabel stands frozen as it walks fully into the light. It's wearing an old fashioned, faded red dress with black polka dots. Hanging off its hairy arm is a wicker picnic basket. In its massive claws is a tattered parasol that's casting red shadows on its astonished face.



Before Mabel knows it, a cool paw is cupping her cheek, upturning her face. The creature's staring down into Mabel's eyes, so all the young girl can see is blue eyes and a pink nose.

"Oh my," the creature awed. "Aren't ya jus' the prettiest lil' thang. Like a lil' baby doll."

And just like that, Mabel's body relaxes.

"Psh. Aw, thanks," Mabel laughs, hand waving off the compliment. "You're..." She pauses as she looks up at the creature before her, spider legs and black fur almost everywhere with skin so pale Mabel can see the veins in it's claws. But there was something rather sweet about the creature's face. It almost looked human, despite the extra eyes and animal nose. "Uh... You're not so bad yourself. I always wanted to be *leggy*... Hee."

It laughs, a light airy sound that makes Mabel think of wind chimes. Mabel smiles. It—no—*she* then offers her paw and Mabel happily grabs hold of it to shake.

“Forgive me, child. I don’t know where my manners went. I’m,” the woman then makes a sound, an almost hiss that ends thickly. Mabel tries replicating the sound, whistling through her front teeth and ending it by saying “dah”.

The woman laughs again, finding delight in Mabel’s botched attempt to say her name. She repeats the sound, and Mabel tries again.

“Soo... Svoo... Svooth?”

Svooth nods, shiny hair falling into her face, but she quickly rights it. She smiles, her four eyes twinkling. Mabel beams back up at her, whistling the strange name a few more times and giggling.

“I’m Mabel.”

“That’s ah lovely name, baby doll. So, are ya okay? No broken bones or anythang like that? That’s a ghastly fall you jus’ took, ya know.”

Mabel wiggles her limbs, grinning.

“All’s fine and dandy!”

Svooth looks impressed.

“Strong *and* beautiful,” she mutters contemplatively, more to herself than Mabel. “And so chic. The mongrels down here have no taste for fashion.”

“*Bawomp*. Thanks,” Mabel chuckles, glancing down at the pink stripes of her sweater. She’s just about to mention that she made it herself when a more pressing issue dawns on her. “Um, where *is* ‘down here’ exactly?”

“Oh, the Burrows, of course,” Svooth answers, sounding rather bored. “Land of the mole people.”

Mole people, eh?

Mabel squints at Svooth, her brain trying to conjure up images of moles for comparison. The paws and the nose match up, Mabel guesses. The tufts of fur coating the woman’s arms might be like a mole’s. She isn’t sure; truthfully she doesn’t know squat about moles. Could they be anything like hamsters, maybe?

Because she and Dipper had owned a few of those growing up, although when she really thinks about it her seven-year-old self had been much more interested in making tiny clothes for her pets rather than learning anything about them.

The large woman-creature's eyes twinkle down at her, and Mabel shivers, although she's not sure why. Svooth's been nothing but kind to her. One thing's for sure, though—this lady is *nothing* like a hamster.

But the thought of her old hamsters has her thinking of Dipper now, which spurs on another thought; as intriguing as the 'land of the mole people' sounds, a little voice in the back of Mabel's mind is starting to nag that it would probably be best to get out of this hole sooner rather than later. She's never been big on dark enclosed spaces, anyway.

"So there are lots of you guys down here, huh?" She says, nodding and placing her hands nonchalantly on her hips, trying to think of a way to steer the conversation in the direction of leaving.

"Hund'rds of us." Svooth nods. Suddenly a concerned look takes over her pale, furry features and she's advancing forward. "Child, you oughta come out of that sunlight before it burns that perfect skin of yours, here, Svooth'll take care of it for ya—"

Mabel's foot automatically takes a step back, and she winces as the bones of some tiny animal crunch loudly. "Oh nah, totally not necessary, me and the sun go way back—oh, welp, okie doke then. Thanks I guess."

The woman now circles around Mabel, resting a hand on Mabel's shoulder and tilting her parasol to protect Mabel from the beams of light. The creature inclines her head to the side, as if pondering something. But then she's smiling, nodding to herself. "If ya'll like, ya can call me Mama instead."

"Mama?" Mabel questions, laughing and lifting an eyebrow. Svooth doesn't seem to think there's anything funny about the offer, however, and the girl's laughter eventually tapers out. "Um—yeahhh. Raincheck on the Mama thing. Although the nickname totes goes with the whole *Gone With the Wind*-y vibe you got goin' on."

Svooth's eyes narrow in the slightest bit and Mabel swallows, hoping she hasn't offended her new friend. Because if she's ever going to get out of this

hole, she's clearly gonna need this lady's help.

She's just opened her mouth to apologize, when she sees movement out of the corner of her eye, in the murky depths of the tunnel that lies behind Svooth. The mole woman must have sensed the movement as well, because her head snaps up, a scowl etching on her face when she mumbles a curse.

“‘ey now, what ya got there?” a rough voice croaks in the the darkness, skittering footfalls stalking towards them. “I don’t care how hungry ya might be, ya know the rules.”

Svooth scoffs, unaffected by the behemoth storming towards them, even when one of his scar riddled claws reaches out for the two females. The grip on Mabel’s shoulder grows harder, more protective.

“Don’t ya even think about it,” Svooth warns him.

“‘ey,” he barks, his massive body still mostly hidden in the shadows, as if he’s afraid to move any closer. “Anythang that falls down the hole bleongs to *us*. That meat is ours, not yers.”

Meat?

Mabel blinks, uncertain. What the heckie deck is this guy yapping about? Actually, from the way this weirdo’s snarling, she doesn’t want to know. In fact, she’s getting all kinds of heebie jeebies right now, so... Maybe she should get the heck out of here.

Mabel looks up, the back of her head grazing Svooth’s abdomen. Beyond the mole woman’s scowling face, beyond the red parasol floating over their heads, way up high is the entrance, where she fell in, her way out. It seems so much further away than it actually is, rays of subdued light glittering just out of her reach. What she wouldn’t give to be that blue butterfly right now!

Her head tilts back down to the giant mole guy in front of her, still in the midst of an argument with Svooth. Mabel tunes back into the discussion that’s growing more and more heated, instantly regretting it a second later when the grisly subject matter truly registers in her ears, her rosy cheeks going pale.

This guy... wants to eat her? He actually wants to *eat* her, flesh, blood, guts,



the whole caboodle! And crud, she's probably delicious!

Mabel's heartbeat leaps into action, her mouth drying up. Uh oh. Usually when she gets herself tangled in all this Gravity Falls supernatural magic-y stuff, Dipper's the one to get her out of it. But... Dipper's not here. Her heart drops. There no way he could ever know where she is. And anyways, he's off hanging out with Wendy somewhere, probably not even looking for her.

All she has right now is this Svooth lady... but that sure is better than nothing. At least this mole person isn't trying to flippin' *eat* her, even if she does come on a little strong.

The scary moleman finally stops talking, instead emitting a livid growl, the low, guttural sound echoing along the rocks and dirt. He takes a menacing step forward, and Mabel bites her lip, her scraped knees almost knocking together as they start to shake. Her black flats back up even further, pressing into her protector's body as far as she possibly can, almost as if she's trying to disappear within the folds of the woman's musty red dress. Her small hands fly up to cling to one of the paws on her shoulder.

Svooth growls right back, sounding just as menacing. Her furry arms wrap around Mabel, drawing her even closer, picking her up even. And then—*bammo*—scary moleman comes charging forth, slamming into the dirt walls when Svooth swerves out of the way. Okay, they need to get out of here!

"Away!" Mabel cries, pointing skywards. Surely Svooth and her spider legs can make it up there. But Svooth is shaking her head, cradling Mabel more fully in her arms, abandoning the sheer red parasol, the wicker basket she's holding poking Mabel's side. The moleman is starting to get up, hissing out weird sounds that Mabel guesses as him calling for others. Uh oh. She looks upwards once more, but shakes her head. "Cheese it!"

Svooth takes off, dashing deeper and deeper into the darkness. Mabel bobs in the mole woman's arms, but Svooth fixes her hold on her, and Mabel's now clinging to her new friend's neck.

Mabel squints over Svooth's shoulder, her hair flying wildly at top speed. She can't see a ding dong thing. But she can hear multiple feet pitter-pattering in the dirt, and deep rough voices shouting after them. And she can feel her pounding heart drop to her butt in fear.

“Don’t worry, babydoll,” Swooth whispers into Mabel’s ear, a claw now supporting Mabel’s head as they take a sharp turn in the dark abyss. “They ain’t gon’ hurt ya. I’ll keep ya safe, I promise.”

The words are supposed to be comforting. In a way they are, because her new friend seems to know what she’s doing and it looks like they’re gaining ground on that not-so-friendly mole guy and his probably just as terrifying buddies. But as the last flecks of sunlight disappear from Mabel’s view, that sinking feeling in her gut grows stronger, the small voice in her head nagging the same words over and over.

*They’re going the wrong way.*

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“Mabel!”

Dipper’s shoulders slump when his call is once again greeted with nothing but the chirps and buzzes of the forest behind the Shack.

It’s getting dark out, and there’s still no sign of her. His voice is starting to get hoarse from the sheer amount of times he’s called her name today.

His heart thumps away in his chest as he navigates around the looming pine trees and ominous looking thickets, fighting through the nerves flying around in his stomach, whispering to himself to, “Man up, Dipper.” As a rule he usually avoids the forest at night, especially after reading about some of the creatures who reside in here, but dang it, he’s already searched everywhere around town, and he refuses to come back to the Shack without Mabel in tow.

He’s finding her. Tonight.

She’s... she’s probably just hiding in a tree somewhere. Any minute now, she’ll swing down from a branch, giggling. He’s going to apologize for ditching her earlier, they’ll awkward sibling hug it out, then they’ll walk back to the Shack hand in hand and everything will be hunky-dory.

He checks the compass on his watch, pauses, and turns left.

Okay, he can’t pretend he isn’t starting to get worried. And that would be a lie anyway, because he started to get worried 3 hours ago when a confused

Grenda and Candy informed him they hadn't seen Mabel all day. At this point the worry weighs him down like a rock in his chest, slowly transforming into fear.

He shuts his eyes for a second and takes in what's supposed to be a calming breath.

*Focus, Dipper.*

“Mayyybellll! C'mon, this isn't funny anymore! I'm sorry, ok?”

The sun finally dips below the horizon, the fast fading light making Dipper feel sick to his stomach. He swallows, trying to keep his cool as he points his flashlight all around him, but the creeping theories of every horrible thing that could've happened to Mabel in these woods are getting harder and harder to fight off.

His breathing comes out faster as he picks up his pace, calling her name with more and more desperation as the minutes slowly tick by. What if she's hurt, or trapped? Or got picked off by some horrible monster? Or... or...

Oh god, he should've never let her go off by herself. He should've been there running at her side when she took off that morning with that stupid yellow kite.

Stupid, stupid...

His self-berating thoughts are interrupted when his sneaker catches a tree root and he finds himself crashing to the ground, flashlight bouncing out of his grip.

“Ugh.”

Dipper pushes himself up, taking off his hat to shake his head back and forth rapidly and get rid of the pine needles in his hair. He blinks and stands, finally taking in his surroundings. The full moon lights up a grassy clearing, a few fallen trees dividing the area. He notices the crickets have stopped chirping and tries to shake off the unnerving feeling that's overtaking his body.

He cups his hands around his mouth. “Mabel! Mabel you out here?”

There's no answer, and to be honest he wasn't expecting one. Something about the silence and stillness of this place feels... off.

Dipper brushes himself off and picks up his flashlight, taking cautious steps forward and raking the stream of light over the long grass that surrounds him. A flash of yellow reflects back at him and his heart stops.

It's a kite. Mabel's kite.

"Mabel!"



He almost faceplants again in his sprint forward, his eyes never leaving the cheery yellow kite that lays abandoned next to one of the fallen trees. Snatching it off the ground, he spins around wildly, calling her name over and over, eyes darting over every bush and every tree that grows around the field.

Nothing. *Nothing*. But she has to be around here—she was here earlier, right? Why would she just leave her kite behind?

Dipper glances down at the yellow fabric clutched in his fingers, eyeing the

sparkling jewels and swirling designs he'd watched her paint on only yesterday.

She wouldn't. His sister would never just throw down her kite and walk away, he had watched her put so much effort into the thing.

Something... something must have happened to her.

His heart pounds so fast that he can't breathe. The hands that clutch the kite for dear life begin to tremble. Tears prick his eyes, blurring his vision as he continues to turn round and round, frantically scanning the surrounding forest.

One of Dipper's worst fears begins to swallow him up, and he can almost physically feel himself falling over into the oncoming nightmare.

*"Mabel!"*

His voice breaks on the second syllable of her name as it finally sinks in that he's going to be walking back to the Shack alone.

## Part 3

Dipper shuffles into the bathroom, making his way over to the sink and flinging open the mirror on the medicine cabinet. He's tired, sore, and frustrated, so he's not really paying attention when he blindly pitches his hand forward to grab the toothpaste. One of the band-aids on his arm catches on the sharp corner of the open mirror, disturbing the fresh bite mark underneath.

"Ah—*dammit*—" A few hygiene products clatter out of the medicine cabinet and onto the floor as he snatches his arm back, hissing in pain. He lifts his forearm to see a little bit of blood gathering over the wound. Swiping it away with his thumb, the boy jams the crinkled bandage back into place, grumbling under his breath.

*Stupid gnomes.*

Dipper drops his throbbing arm to his side and bends down to pick up his toothbrush. He moves slowly, mechanically, his mind busy struggling to take in the last 36 hours of his life.

Last night he, Soos, and Stan had all camped out next to the phone in the living room, hoping for any news about Mabel from the cops. Eventually the other two had passed out, but not Dipper. There was no way his racing mind and heart were ever going to let up enough for him to sleep. *Grandpa the Kid* reruns had played quietly in the background as the thirteen-year-old spent the entire night staring down the front door, at the same time theorizing ideas on where his twin could be. Ideas that were rational, yet optimistic.

Around 4 am it hit him—the gnomes.

*Of course!* It made perfect sense. They'd captured Mabel for a second go at forcing her to marry them; now she was just waiting around for a rescue, probably annoyed, but in all likelihood unharmed. Gnomes wouldn't do anything to hurt their 'queen.'

Filled with self-assurance, he'd packed his bag with all the essentials, swiped the keys to the golf cart, and dug the shovel out of the spider-infested storage shed (with only minimal shrieking). When the first rays of sunlight began to

creep over the horizon, Dipper was already flooring the gas pedal of the golf cart and disappearing into the woods, convinced that in an hour or so Mabel would be sitting in the seat next to him.

Dipper spits, wiping his mouth and setting his toothbrush back on the sink. For a second his eyes linger on the pink toothbrush lying next to his before he hastily averts them and fast-walks out of the bathroom, shutting off the light without a second glance back.

It's just... he'd been so *sure* his theory was right.

So sure that when he screeched down into gnome territory and there was absolutely no trace of Mabel, he'd gotten angry. An overpowering, saturating type of rage he couldn't remember ever having felt before. Somehow he'd ended up with his fingers squeezed tightly around Jeff's stumpy little throat, shaking him around by his neck, threatening him and snarling out demands to give his sister back.

Gnomes don't take too kindly to people trying to choke their leader to death, apparently—he has the scratches and bite marks littering his arms and legs to prove it.

Didn't matter. Him suddenly losing his shit aside, those dim-witted little bearded guys hadn't been lying. Mabel wasn't there. And suddenly Dipper was out of ideas. He didn't realize how much he'd been relying on the gnome theory to keep his chin up and his head in check. Because now that he *is* out of ideas, all of this feels that much more real, and he's suddenly flailing around in the harrowing reality of it all, helpless.

He *really* hates feeling helpless.

Quiet darkness greets him when Dipper creaks open the door to their attic bedroom, making a beeline for his bed and falling into it with a heavy sigh. He rolls onto his back, wide awake. Outside the crickets chirp and the wind whistles calmly through the pine trees, the frame of the old mystery shack making its usual creaks and groans like any other night. Like nothing is wrong. Like everything is normal.

Dipper throws an arm over his face, shutting his eyes tight. There's no chance he's going to find sleep anytime soon, and he doesn't know why he's

even trying.

This is night two without her. It's coming up on 48 hours, and he's still trapped in a nightmare he *really* should have woken up from by now. Because this can't actually be happening, right? These types of things don't happen in real life—at least, not to him, not to his family. Mabel can't just go missing out of the blue, no warning, no explanation.

There's a lingering hollow feeling in his chest, a physical ache that jolts through him every time he turns around expecting to see his twin sister and realizes all over again that she's not there. It won't sink in, the idea won't stick in his brain. A huge part of him is still expecting her to come barging through the back door, safe and smiling and offering a perfectly reasonable explanation for why she up and disappeared for so long.

He keeps waiting, and waiting, and *waiting* for it to happen, for something to change for the better. Meanwhile it feels like everyone around him is succumbing to panic and chaos; there are police and news reports and his parents arrived earlier this evening with colorless faces. They'd hopped on the next flight out from where they'd been vacationing in L.A., Soos making the hour-long drive to pick them up from the closest airport to Gravity Falls.

Stan had broken the news to them that morning, looking older than Dipper had ever seen him as he quietly confessed to them that their kid had gone missing on his watch.

Mabel. *Missing*.

His heart thumps painfully against his ribcage every time he thinks it.

It's been hard, because his anxiety is through the roof and although no one says it out loud, everyone is acting like this situation won't get resolved anytime soon. But Dipper has still managed to maintain the belief that the nightmare, however hellish, isn't going to last forever. He's hanging on tightly to the fact that this is Gravity Falls—crazy things happen to them here all the time and have always turned out ok in the end. Always. And why should now be any different?

She's off frolicking with fairies. Or hanging out with magical talking tree stumps. Or maybe she finally found that cute vampire boyfriend she's always talking about wanting.



Dipper frowns into the darkness.

Okay, scratch that last option. Er—just—yeah. Doesn't matter.

Point is, when it comes to this town the possibilities of supernatural distractions are practically endless, so she's gotta be around here somewhere, right? It's only a matter of time before he finds her. Dipper refuses to believe anything else.

He doesn't have book 3 anymore, but he read it so many times that he's positive he remembers the majority of it. He can just compile a list of what he remembers and fill in the blanks from there. Maybe hit up the library and do some research there too; who knows, he might stumble across a helpful tip or secret. It's certainly happened before.

And then he'll search. He'll go out and look for her every day, and between the cops searching the normal and him searching the abnormal, she's bound to turn up.

Yeah.

Dipper turns on his side, his eyes drifting open again.

Yeah, this is going to work. He's not hopeless. He has a plan now. It's all going to be okay. Mabel is going to be okay.

He feels better for a moment, taking some thin comfort in his new resolve. Until her face flashes in his mind, laughing and smiling, and the words *Mabel* and *missing* form together again. And then they repeat over, and over, and...



A few minutes pass before Dipper finally rips his eyes away from the empty bed across from him, rolling over to face the wall, thin shoulders shaking as he pulls the blanket over his head.

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Dipper takes a deep breath, letting the warm mid-summer air inflate his lungs before letting it out in a giant huff. He watches the small camera crew unload their van from his spot on the bench, purposely isolated from all the people mulling out of the woods in small groups. Of course, him sitting away from everyone else doesn't stop at least one member of the many search groups from coming over to ask how he's doing, or awkwardly patting his back (all mostly unwelcomed, except when it's his parents). Poolcheck was probably the worst of them though, staring intensely into Dipper's eyes for a solid thirty seconds, slapping his faux hand between Dipper's shoulder blades (pain stinging the boy's skin long afterwards), wordlessly nodding before walking off. Though

the intensity in the man's eyes, as unnerving as it usually is, was also kind of... encouraging? Given the circumstances, yeah. Encouraging seems like the right word.

Shandra Jimenez finally steps out of the news van, her dark eyes surveying the area and making contact with Dipper's almost immediately. He quickly looks away, tugging down the visor of his hat. He takes a bite of his sandwich, staring blankly at the yellow notepad he had brought with him on his morning search. Before coming back down to eat with everyone else, Dipper had made the trek up the little mountain of the woods to talk to the Multibear and the Manotaurs. It took longer than expected to get the bull men to talk to him after what happened last time they were together, the Manotaur repeatedly telling him to leave for his emotional issues were stinking up the place in an unmanly way. However, he thinks it was Beady that finally got them to listen to him. The Multibear was a lot easier to ask questions to, but neither of the rivaling creatures had any information on Mabel. People getting lost in the woods wasn't apparently something these guys kept up with. Although Dipper wasn't surprised, it was worth the shot at least.

They at least had some helpful info on rainbow fruit bats. He's not even sure why the creatures popped into his head. Well, that's not really true. This morning he had accidentally picked up Mabel's body-wash, immediately realizing his mistake when he squeezed some out and his nostrils were filled with apple-citrus goodness.

The bats are attracted to things that smelled like fruit; that much he remembered on his own. Maybe some flew Mabel's way and... He honestly isn't sure how that line of thought is suppose to peter out exactly. They're tiny creatures, not really capable of abducting a thirteen-year-old girl. The theory's a work in progress. He flips the yellow pages of his notebook until he finds the chicken scratch of a map to the bat's known dwellings that Multibear had scribbled down for him, even though one of those heads didn't look one-hundred-percent certain if this was right.

But still, it's *something*.

He looks up again, watching the large group of people mill about and line up for food. Almost the whole town is out here. Dipper wears a weak smile.

They're bound to find her today.

They have to.

Shandra catches his eye again, but luckily she isn't looking at him. He honestly doesn't want to be interviewed. The thought made his mouth dry up, and his tongue swell.

The female reporter stands in front of Greasy's diner's server buffet, her face becoming serious as the camera starts rolling. "Shandra Jimenez, here in front of the town's own Mystery Shack, the gathering place for the citizen search parties for Mabel Pines. The young girl had gone missing almost two days ago, but the search is still going strong. As you can see behind me, *Greasy's* is providing lunch for those searching."

"Oh, hello," Lazy Susan greets the camera, waving blankly at the lens instead of handing food to the next person in line.

"The promised free pizza, however, is still a no-show."

Free Pizza Guy's head drops, moodily easing out of line just as Susan hands an empty plate to the guy in front of him.

"*Errnnn*, Jimenez," Toby Determined pops out of nowhere, grass and pine needles sticking to his clothes. His eyebrows are furrowed over his glasses, his face curved in a frown. But his flabby cheeks are flushed pink. "This is *my* scoop! *The Gossiper...*"

Shandra made a hand motion for her cameraman to cut. "Toby," she sighs, rolling her eyes, "leave this kind of news to the *real* reporters. This is important."

"*Hnnn*," Toby whines, but nevertheless pulls out a turkey baster from his left pocket to use as a makeshift microphone. "First one to interview a citizen gets dibs!"

The short, unfortunate looking man takes off, only to trip and fall at Manly Dan's feet. Shandra blinks and steps over Toby, pointing to her camera man before lifting her mic up to Manly Dan. "Any words on how the search is going?"

“WE’RE GONNA FIND THE LITTLE GIRL!” the lumberjack yells before storming off to the front of the lunch line, a loud crack from being stepped on and a muffled whine coming from the *The Gossiper*’s only reporter. As soon as Toby attempts to get back to his feet however, three equally ginger-headed boys are squashing him into the grass again as they rush to catch up with their father, fists pumping in the air, yelling things like, “*Yeah* we are,” and, “Go Dad, *yeah*!” As the stampede of Corduroy boys passes, the wannabe reporter shakily pushes himself up on his elbows, spitting out a mouthful of dirt with a weary groan. Dipper lifts a hand to cover his smirk, trying his best not laugh at the poor dude, but a few chuckles escape anyway. He cuts himself off a moment later though, because laughter sounds odd and wrong coming from his own mouth after more than 48 hours of unconsciously refraining from it.

Dipper purses his lips, letting his turkey on white bread fall back to the flimsy paper plate. His eyes linger on the family of redheads, now walking off with their own loaded plates; if they’d all just returned from searching the woods, then maybe one of the few people he’d be willing to talk to might be nearby, too.

As if she’d been waiting for her cue, Wendy appears in front of him, a plate loaded with snacks between her hands, a muted smile on her face. Leisurly walking over to plop down beside him, his friend sighs as she relaxes into the wooden bench.

“So how’s it hangin’, buddy?” she asks delicately, her voiced subdued as if she already knows what his answer will be. Dipper shrugs, cocking his head and gluing his eyes to his half eaten sandwich.

“Uh? As good as it can be, I guess.”

“Mmm,” is Wendy’s sympathetic response. He takes her silence as encouragement to keep talking, twiddling his antsy fingers between his knees.

“Mostly just focusing on not completely freaking out,” he admits, looking up to take in his surroundings again. The town’s many residents continue to swarm around the Shack, some of them just returning from the woods, some of them headed back out, a lot of them sitting on the benches of scattered picnic tables, munching on chips and sandwiches. Despite him wanting to avoid most of them, the buzz of people is surprisingly comforting. He turns to quirk one corner of his

mouth in Wendy's direction. "Y'know? Today's helping, though. Really, it is."

She grins back, taking a bite out of a cookie. "Yeah. The people around here are all pretty nuts, but they come through when you need them to."

He nods slowly. "Yeah. They do."

The pair jumps when Toby suddenly comes stumbling out of the bushes behind them, a bunch of leaves stuck to his hat, his turkey baster held at the ready, wholly disrupting their quiet appreciation. "Ehh, pardon me," he has the decency to whine out before swooping down on a bewildered Dipper and talking at the speed of light. "So as the brother of the missing girl, might you have a few words for *The Gossiper*—nyehh—!" He doesn't get the chance to finish his question as Wendy, who towers over the small man, stands to drag him out of Dipper's face by one of the straps of his high rising suspenders.

"Alright alright, just keep walking, pal. Nothin' to see here." She lightly flings him away, and Dipper watches with wide eyes as the guy skitters away like a crab, shoulders slumped, wailing loudly about how no one will talk to him, and how is he supposed to get his big scoop now? Wendy crosses her arms, her long red hair flying around her shoulders as she sits back down in a huff.

"Thanks for that," Dipper mumbles, rubbing his arm and putting down his plate, suddenly not very hungry anymore.

"No problem. Dude needs some serious sensitivity training."

"Along with some serious anti-creeper training. Yeesh, how long was he even hiding back there?"

Wendy pats his shoulder. "Try not to think about it."

Just then, Manly Dan stands from his seat nearby, almost flinging over the picnic table onto a giggling Old Man McGucket as he begins to lumber away. "C'mon boys! Got ourselves a job to do," he bellows, his fists in the air, narrowing his eyes deeply and flexing his arms downward as he repeats solemnly, "Got ourselves a job to do." His three sons follow faithfully in his wake, all headed towards a small crowd of people gathering at the mouth of the woods on the east side of the Shack. Wendy sighs, setting down her half-eaten plate.

“Looks like the fam’s gearing up again. I’m gonna head back out with them.” The older girl stands, turning to look at her companion still crouched on the bench. “See ya out there later?”

Dipper smiles up at her. “Definitely.”

“Right on,” She reaches down to affectionately flick the brim of his cap so it rises a bit higher on his forehead. “Chin up, man. It’s only a matter of time.”

His throat feels a little tight, so he just nods with that same tiny smile, inwardly clinging to her words, repeating them in his head. *Only a matter of time.*

That understanding look comes back to her freckled face, and she hovers around the bench for one more second, finally deciding on just patting the younger boy on the back. “Kay then. Later, Dip.” He watches her start the journey towards her dad and brothers, but she turns around after a few steps, a sly grin on her lips. “By the way, looks like you have some incoming company.”

He quirks an eyebrow. “Huh?”

But she only laughs, subtly jabbing a thumb to her right before stuffing her hands in her pockets and walking away. Confused, Dipper’s head swivels in the direction of Wendy’s point, his face flinching a moment later when he realizes exactly who the “incoming company” is going to be. Aw, man. He’s really, really not in the mood. But he still manages to pull off a weak grin as they bumble over to him.

“Dipper!” Grenda shouts, her booming voice beating his ear drums. “Hold up!”

Not like he was going anywhere, but okay. He waits for Grenda, who’s carrying Candy piggyback style, to make it to him. Though when she does, she spends a good minute or so hunched over and out of breath. Candy climbs off her friend’s back, careful not to scratch the larger girl with her fork finger extensions. Why is she even wearing those?

The small girl adjusts her glasses, smiling tentatively at him. “So... how are you, friend?” she asks, her soft tone sounding more delicate than usual.

“Um, y’know.” His eyes dart off somewhere to the side, just in time to catch the back of Wendy’s flannel shirt disappearing into the trees. “I’m... I’m rallying.” Dipper takes a bite of his dry sandwich, needing to do something to fend off the sad, awkward feeling that wants to creep up the back of his neck. He’s starting to get really tired of people asking him that question. Unfortunately it’s all anyone can think to say to him, it seems.

Candy nods, blinks, and taps two of her forks together. “That is good, so are we. We um, we wanted to...”

Grenda finally recovers, perking up and finishing Candy’s sentence for her. “We wanted to see if we could help!”

Was that all? Dipper swallows down the wad of papery bread and turkey and cranes his neck around Grenda’s frame, gesturing towards the woods. “Oh, well. I think there’s another party leaving now, you could probably catch ‘em if you —”

Candy shakes her head and points at his chest. “You. We wanted to help you.”

“Huh?”

They both simply smile at him as Grenda offers, “We figured you had a plan or something, and we wanna help.”

He’s unable to stop himself from responding with the first question that pops into his head. “What makes you guys think I have a plan that’s any different from all this?” He halfheartedly gestures a hand at the surrounding bustle of people again.

Candy just keeps smiling, while Grenda laughs and answers him like it’s totally obvious. “Duh, ‘cause you’re Dipper! You always have a plan. And don’t forget Mabel’s wise words. My strength, Candy’s spirit, your brains—together we’re practically like, a dream-team! We’ll find your sister in no time.” The girl smacks a meaty fist into her palm.

“Precisely. No time,” Candy pipes enthusiastically.

The boy raises his eyebrows, a small smile spreading on his lips despite



himself. His eyes dart back and forth between Candy and Grenda, and he finds himself suddenly appreciative of their upbeat attitude. Their eyes are worried, yet their faces are truly optimistic. And he could probably stand to use their over-the-top optimism.

His thoughts then jump to the yellow notepad tucked inside his vest, the hand in his lap nearly following them to make sure it's still there, safe and sound. These two were certainly on point about him having a plan, even if said plan *is* a vague work in progress. But he's not sure how much of his plan he'd actually consider sharing with them, seeing as how by normal societal standards it *is* pretty out there. Plus there was the fact that Mabel's friends are so... er... what's the word he's looking for?

"Please, Deepurr," Candy breaks the silence, making Dipper realize he'd gone quiet for a while. "We're her friends, we want to help."

"Really, really, *really* want to help," adds a desperate looking Grenda, her large hands clasped together in a begging pose.

Dipper's eyes flick between them a second more, before his shoulders relax and he relents. They're Mabel's friends, and they clearly genuinely want to help. So he'll let them. And it's not like he has to tell them the exact nature of his plans anyway.

"Alright," he says, watching the two girls' faces light up. The sight unexpectedly sends a much needed tinge of hope to his chest, Mabel's voice cheering on about spirit and strength and brains faintly echoing in his ears. "We can start searching together, then."

## Part 4

It's really quiet down here at night.

Or rather, Mabel *thinks* it's night time. There's really no way to know, but Mabel assumes it's night because Svooth had just tucked her into a bed of moss and leaves. The mole woman had kissed Mabel's temple, her wet nose brushing against the young girl's skin and making her shiver.

"Sweet dreams, baby doll," the woman had whispered in Mabel's ear with a slight hiss.

Yeah, *as if* lady.

Mabel rubs her temple in disgust for what had to be the millionth time. She can just barely make out the soft sound of Svooth walking around the burrow. Other than that, silence.

So she waits. Mabel blinks in the darkness, sighing with impatience. The faintly glowing stone protruding out of the dirt wall on the other side of the room barely lights anything. She wiggles in the bed just to listen to the leaves rustle.

The silence is just so strange. At home, before going to sleep, she could hear cars fly by outside, a TV or radio playing in one room or another, maybe some neighborhood kids playing one last game before going inside, dogs barking, their house cat making things clatter to the floor, or the sounds of people laughing and talking loudly on their front porches. Even at the Mystery Shack, she could at least hear owls and wolves outside, trees rustling in the wind, the low buzz of an insomnia suffering Dipper playing a handheld video game, plus the faint sound from downstairs of Grunkle Stan watching some old movie with the volume set far too high.

But there isn't any of that down here.

There isn't *anything* down here.

Mabel twirls her hair anxiously, slipping a lock into her mouth only to spit it out. Yuck. It's all greasy. With a sour face, she pulls up her shirt and wipes her

tongue. Didn't she just wash her hair yesterday? It has only been a day, right? Or, maybe it's been two? No, no. It's only been a day.

Mabel sighs, struggling to piece together some kind of timetable from when she fell till now. She bites off her nails, one by one, in concentration. She recalls them zigzagging in the darkness. The fear that crashed over her when she thought they've been caught. A powerful flash of light had come from nowhere, causing Svooth to scream bloody murder and fall to the ground.

"My eyes," Svooth had hissed miserably, rocking on the ground. The flash of white had started to fade and Mabel could finally see. Tunnels leading to every direction surrounded them. The mole people that tossed the light-bomb had stalled, hovering in a tunnel behind them. Mabel had thought it strange, before it dawned on her that they were waiting out the sudden faux sunshine before moving in to collect them. Apparently they hadn't been expecting to use it, because if light had such an effect on them, Mabel imagines they would probably have some kind of funky sunglasses to wear.

If she had known then what she knew now, Mabel probably would've taken that moment bolt away from those creepers *and* Svooth. Instead she had helped her protector to her feet, begging Svooth to tell her which way to go before the light faded completely. Svooth was heavy for Mabel's noodle arms, but she supported her the best she could into the darkness of a tunnel.

It didn't take long for Svooth to get her vision back, and Mabel was once again scooped up in the mole woman's arms. It didn't take long at all for them to reach Svooth's burrow, Svooth's home.

"My private abode," Svooth had said, whilst placing Mabel on the ground. "Do ya like it?"

It was pitch black inside, equally as dark as it was outside the burrow. Mabel had lifted her hands before her face, wiggling them to test her sight. She didn't see a thing. Not even an outline. But she had nodded in reply anyway.

"No one will be knockin' on this door to get ya," Svooth had said with conviction. "Everyone knows I am not one to be trifled with. That idiot might not have recognized me out there, but he will if he dares follow us further. No one would be foolish enough to fight me, in my own home no less."

Perhaps that was supposed to be a reassurance to Mabel and her safety. And it kind of was, with questions of Svooth's alleged strength popping into her brain. But at the same time, it made something in Mabel feel off in regards to Svooth. But she had pushed the feeling away, enjoying the giddiness of escape.

They had chatted about nothing in particular, like Mabel's clothes.

"You made this?" Svooth had asked, sounding impressed as she inspected Mabel's craftsmanship. Mabel nodded, grinning proudly and offering to make the mole woman a sweater of her own. But before the offer was fully out of Mabel's mouth, Svooth had tugged the pink sweater off of the young girl, leaving Mabel in her undershirt. "I must confess," Svooth had said softly, "I have ah certain fondness fer human made things."

Since she would be leaving soon, and there really was no telling how she could deliver a specially made sweater without getting attacked again, Mabel told Svooth to keep the stripped sweater. It was the least Mabel could give her. They continued to chitchat, using words to fill the darkness encasing them.

Svooth had responded to Mabel's complaint of the dark by digging into a wall, unsurfacing a glowing stone. It had barely lit a thing, but it was enough to excite Mabel's eyes. She could make out the outlines of her surroundings now.

"It's ah nuisance, really. Too many of these is murdah on the eyes, and they're pretty much sprouting out where evah ya go. Idiot city planner put the townhall and the market place in the one cavern that's just full of 'em. I swear, it's like they thrive on pissin' me off with their imbecile ways."

Mabel watched one of Svooth's legs twitch, and if she could have clearly seen the woman's face, Mabel had a gut feeling her expression wasn't sweet and soft like it had been when they first met. So the young teen changed the subject. They talked and talked, Svooth occasionally snapping when Mabel said something that might have been deemed inappropriate. As time went by, Mabel felt less and less comfortable around her savior, but she couldn't figure out why, so she simply ignored the feeling and laughed at a snide joke Svooth had made. She told the older woman about her fight with Dipper, which made Svooth frown. But Mabel just laughed it off, and explained that her brother was just a dork and things would be fine between them.

"So when do you think it'll be safe for you to take me home, Miss Svooth,"

Mabel had asked after some time, her voice laced with laughter.

Svooth went silent, her leg twitching again. Instead of answering, Svooth eased closer to Mabel, all four of her baby blue eyes trained on Mabel.

“Ya know, baby doll, I’ve been living here alone fer a mighty long time. When my papa passed, he left me with a lot ah things. But none of them was love.”

Mabel frowned, eyes growing wide with pity. Svooth pat her head, and gave her a sad smile.

“It’s fine, child. I just want ya to know how much yer company means to me. But it’s not safe out there, ya know. Not fer a pretty little thing like you.”

Mabel blinked, unsure what that meant exactly. She knew it wasn’t safe, but... but... “But I gotta get home soon. You see—”

“Baby doll, ya seem to be confused,” Svooth said tenderly, shaking her head. “*This* is yer home now.”

“*Er*, say what now?”

“This is yer home now,” Svooth repeated sternly, her voice no longer holding the tenderness it had just seconds before. “Now don’t make yer Mama repeat herself again. I just *saved yer life*, child. Without me, ya’ll been dead!”

The reminder was enough to keep Mabel from violently lashing out, but she nonetheless had gasped and taken several steps away from Svooth, tripping on something and falling on her butt again for the fourth time that day. The thing that tripped her was cool, and jingled beneath her feet. It was a chain hooked to the wall on one end, with a shackle on the other. A deep seeded panic had filled her, but before she could scurry to her feet, Svooth picked her up and carried a stunned, yet squirming Mabel deeper into the burrow.

It was all so bizarre. What even happened after that?

She can’t recall, it was all a crazy blur. By the time she gets to biting down her pinkie nail, Mabel groans in frustration, flopping over to her side. She squints at her nails; unable to make out the color of the nail polish, Mabel pouts.

She brings her hand back to her mouth, using the now stubby nails to scrape away the gunk on her teeth.

Huh. Maybe she has been down here for more than a day?

No. That's not possible, right? She couldn't have been down here for more than a day. She is *not* stuck here!

Mabel hops up, leaves scattering about her. She runs towards the glowing stone, starting the first step of her escape plan by digging and clawing at the dirt around it. It's... it's a lot bigger than she initially thought. She grumbles. This is taking too long! She huffs angrily, giving up on digging it out. She tugs harshly on a protruding edge, trying to force it out, and slices her palm. Hissing in pain, Mabel bites back a yelp.

*Mother fudger!*

Tears sting her eyes as she wipes the blood on her shirt. Under the gem's light, she quickly inspect her hands. It isn't that bad of a cut.

She hurriedly glances at the plank of wood acting as her door, then back to the stone. Her heart is racing. Time feels like its running out. Her little escape plan isn't starting off right at all.

But she needs to leave.

She glares at the stone one last time before sticking her tongue out at it. She didn't need it. She can make it without it.

Uninjured hand on the wall, Mabel eases out of her little room. Silence. Mabel tiptoes in the opposite direction of Svooth's room, going the long way towards the burrow's exit. She stays close to the wall in hopes of avoiding the furniture Svooth's collected. Mabel can't really see anything. But she keeps going forward, holding her breath until finally, *finally*, her hand brushes against the wood of the front door.

"Sayonara, you cray-cray spider-mole lady," Mabel mumbles to herself, saluting the lightless room behind her.

And with that, she dashes out into the darkness, running down the tunnel to

freedom. A giant grin breaks out on her face, a joyous laugh bubbling out of her as she runs with her fingers grazing the dirt wall.

She's already thinking about bursting inside the Mystery Shack, and pulling Dipper into the most bone crushing bear hug! She'll kiss his entire goober face, even smack a few right on his lips, just because she wants to. She'll roll on the floor with Waddles, nuzzling her cheek into his cute, fat face. She'll jump into their great uncle's arms, and demand to be carried to a warm bath. With bubbles. She imagines the grand meal they'll eat of all her favorites. Spaghetti tacos, pudding cups, frozen yogurt, mac and cheese pizza, chili dogs, frozen watermelon slices...

Mabel stops short. She blinks. The wall...

The wall is gone!

She takes a few steps back, feeling the dirt wall beneath her palm once again. She walks slowly forward until it vanishes again. Oh no. Tears well up in her eyes as she walks blindly forward. Where the heck is she? She tries to think back to earlier when Svooth had her tucked in her arms, dashing away to the safety of Svooth's abode. Everything had went by so fast. Mabel's mental map is blurry but...

This was that intersection. The spot where the mole police or whoever they were had blasted that harsh light to incapacitate Svooth during their getaway. How many tunnels were there again? Four? Seven? Which way was the exit?

Mabel bumbles around in the darkness, pitifully trying to remember which way they came, when she bumps into a large rock. "Ow," Mabel whimpers, rubbing her sore shin.

"Darlin', will ya look at that? Somebody's snack done gone scampering off," a male voice drawls in the dark.

Mabel spins around in a panic, desperately trying to find its source.

"Well ya know what they say. Findah's keepah's," a feminine voice giggles, making Mabel's blood freeze. She shakes her head. There is *no way* she's going to be some mole's midnight snack!

Mabel darts off, slamming hard into a wall after only a few seconds. She bounces back, tumbling over and falling on her butt. She can hear them chuckling, mocking her. A fear like she's never known bubbles up inside her and she crawls backwards, failing to get on her feet, dirt scratching into her hand wound. Hoping that she's moving in the opposite direction of them, she keeps scooting backwards until her back's against a wall. Her hands ball up into fists. Tears slide down her cheeks as she tries to ready herself for the attack. And then she feels it. Little puffs of air tickling her damp cheek. They're right in front of her!

"Left hook!" Mabel screams, clocking the creature right in one of its eyes. It screeches in pain, the girl creature letting out a shocked gasp as Mabel tries to dash off once again.

"Ya gonna pay fer that!" he yells, stomping behind Mabel. As she's running around blindly, her life doesn't flash before her eyes the way she always thought it would when death came knocking.

A large, heavy hand sweeps under her, tripping Mabel. With a grunt, she spins haphazardly to the ground.

She isn't thinking about warm water or yummy food anymore. She isn't thinking about that new nail polish she never used, or that sweater for Waddles she didn't finish.

She's not thinking about her parents, her friends, Stan, or Waddles. Strangely, not even Dipper came to mind.

In that moment, as the male creature looms over the small girl with a laugh as his date applauds him, Mabel realizes none of those things really matter. That none of the ones she loves can help her. And if she's going to make it out of all of this alive, she's going to have to focus. Take her time. And use *all* of her resources.

"MAMA!" Mabel cries out from the top of her lungs, and within seconds Mabel hears Swooth's wailing scream echo through the tunnels.

"'Mama'?" the girl mole parrots in bewilderment only a second before releasing a pain filled grunt. The male snarls, a hard thud following, rubble hitting the ground. A threatening hiss bounces off the tunnel's walls. Arms wrap



themselves around Mabel, and she doesn't fight them. Mabel can't see, but she simply *knows*, so her arms wrap around the creature carrying her. And in minutes, Mabel is once again being tucked into a bed of leaves and moss.

"Don't ya evah try to leave me again!" Svooth hisses, harshly holding Mabel's head between her massive claws. All four of her blue eyes glare into Mabel, a snarl curling her features. "Do ya hear me, child? Ya can't evah leave me."

She squeezes Mabel's head slightly, adding to the unspoken threat that laced her words. Mabel manages to nod, and Svooth roughly drops her hands and scoffs.

"How can I even trust ya now? ...Maybe I should just shackle ya to ah wall."

"No! Don't! I won't leave! I... I wasn't even trying to leave before," Mabel quickly lies. "I was just... uh looking around my new home... C'mon, now Svo—Mama. *Pssh*. Me leave you? That's crazy talk."

Svooth smiles then, gently touching a fresh scrape on Mabel's arm.

"Those mongrels. Idiots, the lot of 'em. But don't ya worry, baby doll. Mama gonna keep ya safe here." She pats the girl's head sweetly. "I'mma go get somethin' to fix ya up before ya go beddy bye. But let this be a learning experience for ya, mah dear. Ya can't leave this burrow."

She kisses Mabel's forehead and whispers, "*Not evah*."

## Part 5

“This thing on? Okay... I’ll have a number 4 with a side of fried rice... and could I get it without the like... little green things in it? You know those things?”

“No chives. You want drink with that?”

“Yeah can I get a Diet Pitt? And can we make that extra large? Yeah? Awesome. Oh and I’ll take a couple of those churro things too.” Soos, who’d had his head so far out the window that his nose was practically touching the drive-thru speaker, temporarily pulls himself back inside the old brown truck to turn to the thirteen-year-old buckled into the passenger seat. “Alright dude, you know what ya want? S’on me.”

Dipper’s stomach lurches. The thought of eating food from *Burrito Gong*—a faux Mexican/Chinese joint that served as probably not only the weirdest fast food place in town, but also the weirdest in existence—in this heat isn’t sitting well with him, so he raises his hands and shakes his head. “Nah, don’t order me anything man, I’ll eat later.”

“You want some nachos? I’ll get you some nachos. Nachos are always nice.”

“Soos it’s fine I’m not—”

“And uh yeah, can I also get a medium order of nachos? Hold the soy sauce? Thanks.”

His portly friend gives him a thumbs up and throws the rumbling pick up truck into drive to settle into the small line of cars leading up to the window. Dipper returns it with a weak smile, inwardly rolling his eyes. An appetite wasn’t really something he possessed in general these days, so it’d be nice if Soos started learning to take no for an answer whenever he decided to stop for snacks on the way home from whatever they were doing (which was pretty much 100% of the time).

With a weary sigh, Dipper lifts his pine tree hat to push his sweaty bangs to one side of his face, then drags it back down over his forehead. A crazy heat wave rolled into town a few days ago, and still doesn’t show any signs of letting

up. Nobody in this town ever seems to indulge of the wonders of air conditioning either—Soos’ truck is no exception, the boy yet again shifting uncomfortably in his damp shirt and shorts, unsticking the skin of his thighs from the cheap leather seats only to have it re-stick an inch or so to the right.

Normally he’d be resigned to it, since this is hardly the first heat wave he’s had to endure in Gravity Falls... but today has been long and isn’t anywhere near over, plus it still has the high potential to be a very, *very* important day for everybody, so the stiflingly hot air is doing nothing but magnifying his anxiety and nerves, setting him way more on edge than usual. Not to mention Soos’ B.O. in this weather is rank. Like you better breathe through your mouth or else *rank*.

They move up one car space, and handyman next to him turns up the static-laden rock song playing on the radio to do a fierce air guitar solo. The fingers resting protectively over the two giant stacks of flyers sitting in the middle of the front seat rile up into a drum, but other than that, Dipper doesn’t move, only stares aimlessly out the window. His hand hasn’t really left the stack since they left Soos’ favorite place in the world—the copier store—about 15 minutes earlier. Before that the two of them had spent the entire day replacing the flyers around town that had been weathered away by the elements during the last month. It was a necessary job, because who knows? Even though the vast majority of the town has been involved in the search, there might still be *someone* around here who’s been living under a rock, and doesn’t know about Mabel yet. And a faded, ripped, or water damaged flyer wasn’t going to do them any good.

Not only did he and Soos replace the old flyers, they’d hung up new ones. They’d driven around today until every store window, lamppost, fence and community bulletin board had been slapped with at least two ‘have you seen me’ posters with information and Mabel’s seventh grade school portrait on them.

Basically, Dipper has been staring at Mabel’s wide, brace-free smile all day. Which he can totally handle, he can, it’s just. He keeps involuntarily reliving her happy dance from getting her braces off the morning of seventh grade picture day. Right before leaving for the orthodontist she’d intercepted his routine zombie walk to the bathroom and dragged him into her room, dressed in a blindingly colorful sundress, a giant orange chrysanthemum pinned in her hair, purple flats she’d bejeweled herself snug on her feet. Any morning grogginess had been blown out of him when she’d jacked up the volume on her Kermit the

frog iPod player, blasting the peppiest *Sev'ral Timez* song in existence, then pulled him into a dance, singing at the top of her lungs; he'd fought it at first, but her joyful giggling had been sort of contagious. So for one song, he'd allowed her to flap their arms around every which way, bump the side of her hip against his while they did the wave, spin him around and around and around as she'd gleefully yelled, "*Metal free Mabel, coming soon to a camera near you!*"

Dipper's fingers drum a little faster, as the familiar train of thought predictably ends with what's been niggling away at him all day.

...His parents said they should be back at some point tonight, no matter what ended up happening. It's only late afternoon, but there's always a chance they could return earlier—what if they're already back? What if that person who claimed they saw her disappear into an apartment building with a woman in Corvallis was telling the truth? Of all the tips they'd received, this one had seemed so legit. What if they're already back, and she's with them? What if today's the day he'll get to see her again?

His fingers drum faster still.

Or... what if it's not. What if today turns up empty handed, just like every other day of this past month from hell?

August is coming to a close, and still no sign of Mabel. It's been 1 month, 1 week—he glances down at his watch—and 6 hours... no minute count, though. He's not *that* much of a freak. Or at least, that's what he tells himself.

So many leads from so many people—people who are just trying to help, he has to keep reminding himself—yet thus far, so little results. And every day without results is like the equivalent of a tiny chunk of Dipper's insides being forcibly carved away with a spoon. If all the other 'leads' they've gotten from the website or the hotline have taught him anything, it's that it's not a good idea to put much faith into them, no matter how legit they sound. Logic and hope are always at war with each other in his head, but can anyone really blame him if hope keeps winning out, no matter how many times he's let down?

Although the constant letdowns... they hurt. Each one worse than the one before it.

Last night, during his routine staring contest with the ceiling, he remembers

letting himself wonder if he could even handle another disappointment. That stubborn thread that's holding him together keeps getting wound tighter and tighter... he's not sure how much longer he can keep up this composure he's been working so hard to maintain.

Dipper then straightens up in his seat, his mouth forming into a tight line.

He'll keep it up *as long as it takes*.

"Yo, uh, Dipper. Not that the crazy finger drumming isn't awesome back up to my guitar solo, but you okay bro?"

He blinks, and his fingers come to a halt. "Huh? Oh, yeah. Nah, I'm cool."

Soos looks like he wants to say something more and can't think of the words yet, but they've finally reached the window, so he drops it in favor of handing over a wad of one dollar bills to the unimpressed looking guy staring into the car, then reaping his prize of a bag of questionable-smelling fast food. They're about to drive off when the employee thrusts a tiny green sombrero made of what looks like bamboo into Soos' retreating hand.

"For the boy. Have a nice day." The man resolutely slides the window shut. Soos grins, ignoring Dipper's long groan.

"Well somebody's day just got cooler, eh?" He sets the sombrero on top of Dipper's cap but the teenager swipes it off a second later with a glare.

"Okay, why do they keep giving me these stupid things? They're for kids like 10 and under! And I've never gotten a kid's meal here before in my life!"

"Pshh, well if you don't want it, share the wealth dude." His older friend pauses in unwrapping a burrito full of sweet n' sour beef to lean over and unlatch the glove compartment, the door falling open to reveal a stash of the small, colorful, culturally inaccurate hats. Dipper rolls his eyes and smashes the green one amongst the rest of them, forcing the little door shut with a bang.

"Be my guest."

"Sweet. Now I have all 6 colors. Boosh!" Soos turns up the radio again, simultaneously taking another large chomp of his 'burrito' and hitting the gas,

and soon they're back on the road, headed home. Now that they're in motion again, the air rushes in through the open window, cooling the sweat trickling down Dipper's face and neck. Even if it is hot air, it feels pretty heavenly compared to just sitting there stewing in the mugginess, and he lets his head rest against the skinny arm that's hanging out the window, careful to keep one hand on the brim of his hat so it doesn't blow away. Unsurprisingly, his other hand returns to its position of being splayed out over top of Mabel's paper face.



The copier store had been their last stop of the day. The magical one in Stan's office had finally kicked the bucket (otherwise, there would most definitely be an army of Dipper clones aiding in the search right about now), and they needed a fresh stack of flyers since tomorrow, they had plans to drive one town over, and repeat the whole process. This is pretty much what Dipper spends his time doing between planning and actual physical searching. As far as he's concerned, he shouldn't be resting until she's either found, or her face is on the back of every freakin' milk carton in the country.

The volume of the radio lowers again and Soos' voice replaces it. "Seriously,

that's some intense hand dancin' goin' on there, dude. Somethin' bothering you? You can tell your pal Soos, I am a fortress for secrets and or confessions." Dipper blushes, lifting his head in time to catch bits of food fly out of his companion's mouth and onto the steering wheel. He hadn't even realized he'd started up the incessant finger drumming again.

"Just a little antsy, I guess," he replies, shrugging.

Soos just nods in understanding, his eyes flitting back to the road. Shoving the last of his snack in his mouth, he scratches the hairs scattered along his round jaw, chewing in silence before speaking again. "Yo, random thought, but I really dig the picture ya picked for the flyers."

"Wasn't me, Mom and Dad picked it." He rubs the side of his nose. "... School pictures are pretty customary for this sort of thing."

"Huh, yeah, guess that's true. Well it's still a good picture. Very Mabel-y." Dipper forces a smile, then turns to look back out the window, and Soos starts tapping his hands back and forth on the steering wheel. After a few seconds the man-child starts chuckling to himself. "Hey, what if we like, took your school picture and cut out just your face, and then just like, glued it onto Mabel's face? Think people would be able to tell the difference? Y'know, since you dudes are twins and stuff? Bet they wouldn't."

Dipper's features sink into a frown. He's usually not this touchy at Soos'... well, Soos-ness, but this stupid heat... "Why would we ever wanna do that?"

"I dunno, could be like, an experiment or something. All science-y and whatnot. Like the Coke vs. Pepsi science fair project. An old classic."

The boy tiredly rubs at his eyes. "Me and Mabel are fraternal twins, Soos."

"..."

"As in we're not identical."

"Could've fooled me, you two have always looked crazy alike."

"I guess." Dipper chews on his upper lip, attempting casualness as he picks up the flyer on top, cradling the flapping paper in his hands while the wind

makes its best attempt at carrying it out the window. They do still look pretty alike, he thinks, although Mabel's face is cuter, much softer, much more approachable, way more carefree... definitely the better-looking twin, compared to his own face that's becoming riddled with acne, awkward and sweaty as it ever was, red rings permanently etched under his eyes. Uh. That might be his low self-esteem talking. Seriously though, anyone who claims his sister isn't pretty would be lying. No point in him denying it just because they're related, since in his mind, it's much more fact than potentially awkward opinion.

Running a forlorn thumb along the edge of the paper, Dipper ponders how Mabel's face might look like right now. Is she sad, or scared, or... maybe even happy, wherever she is? Could she be thinking about him in this second, too?

He tears his eyes away from her unblinking ones. As long as she's safe. That's all that matters. He should really stop picturing her back at the Shack though, sitting between his parents and waiting for him to get there, when his hopes are so fragile; he has to ban himself from nagging Soos to drive faster.

The truck pulls to a stop at a red light. Dipper feels the sensation of eyes on him, and turns to see Soos giving him that soft-eyed look. It's not pity, which he never fails to be grateful for... it's more of the guy's usual quiet hopefulness. Of everyone involved in this, Soos has definitely been the most genuinely optimistic about Mabel, never faltering in telling Dipper things like, "Hey, ya never know, today could be the day," and "Don't worry bro, s'gonna turn out fine, you'll see," and "Mabel's like, totally street smart. I bet she's doin' okay, wherever she got held up."

Sometimes, Dipper needs Soos' optimism to get through the day. Other times, he just wishes the guy would shut up, no matter how well he means. At the moment he can't tell which it's going to be, yet.

As their eyes meet across the cab of the truck, a meaty fist reaches out to tap against the younger boy's upper arm and gesture towards the two piles of flyers. "Hey, hopefully we won't even end up needing those things tomorrow. You know? I've been gettin' good vibes from the past few days."

"Mmhm..." He tries to respond with 'same,' but the word won't come out. Instead he lays the piece of paper in his hands back on top of the stack.

"She'll turn up, Dipper."



The light turns green, and as the coughing and sputtering truck gets moving again, the boy strangles the *'How do you know for sure?'* that tries to breach his thoughts, replacing it with a sound, *'Of course she will.'*

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When the grounds of the Mystery Shack finally come into view from behind the trees, the first thing Dipper's eyes land on is his dad's Volvo, along with the unmarked police car parked next to it.

"Wait, they're already back? They're back!" His heart starts to thrum in his chest; his gut feeling from earlier was right. They're back.

And it's possible that...

Was—was Mabel going to be there waiting for him when he gets inside?

Soos has barely shifted his truck into park before the Dipper throws open the passenger side door and comes hurdling out of it, sprinting through the dead grass to skip all 3 steps on the back porch with one giant leap. He's a foot away from the door, arm already outstretched to wrench it open when it opens on its own, nearly clocking him in the face. Startled, the boy jumps back with a hand on his hat as a tall man wearing slacks and a button down comes striding out, looking straight ahead, his height almost causing him to overlook the short teen next to him. He might have, too, if Dipper hadn't cleared his throat.

The man looks bemused for a second, then flits his gaze downwards. "Oh. Hello, Dipper. Didn't see ya there, son."

Dipper swallows the urge to narrow his eyes. Detective Hurd, the guy leading Mabel's case and whom he'd been seeing less and less of lately, has slowly been rising on his least favorite people list. For one thing the irrational side of him gripes that the guy is supposed to be really good at what he does, so why isn't Mabel back yet? For another, this dude tends to treat him like he's eight rather than almost fourteen, sending him out of the room half the time to talk to his parents alone. What's it going to take to get people to understand that he's old enough to handle this, that he's smart, that he can help?

When Hurd doesn't say anything else, Dipper lifts an aggravated eyebrow. Is this guy *kidding* with this silent bullshit? "So?" He tries, and fails, to control his jittery tone. "What's the word? Did you guys—"

But the man only raises a hand slightly to cut him off, shaking his head and breaking eye contact as he continues the walk towards his car. “Best to go inside and talk to your parents about it, sport.”

Dipper heart sinks considerably, but not completely, and once again he’s frantically swooping towards the knob on the back door.

Maybe the look on the guy’s face doesn’t mean what he thinks it means, maybe there’s still a chance—

But all that waits for him when he skids into the living room is Stan drooped in the armchair, his dad standing in the corner talking quietly into his phone, his mom hunched over the table, her head resting in her hand, a couple of balled up tissues scattered around her.

And no Mabel.

“So then, I guess...?” he can’t help but mumble towards Stan, who just shakes his head in response before the question even finishes.

...Right.

And once again, that feeling of deflating like a balloon washes over his body. Why does he even bother ever getting his hopes up? Of course, he knows the answer to that question; he’s just feeling majorly disappointed and pissed off, that’s all. And he’s getting fed up with these ‘tips’ that end up doing nothing but cause him and his family more pain. He knows it’s not the cops’ fault, or the caller’s fault, or anyone’s fault... it’s just...

He heaves out an empty breath and walks over to put an arm around his mom, who says nothing, only lays her hand over his in response. After another second his dad hangs up the phone and turns on the both of them, looking crestfallen.

“Sorry kiddo,” the older man says quietly, coming over to slump in the chair across the table. “Didn’t end up panning out the way we wanted it to.”

“Yeah... kind of figured that one out on my own.” Silence settles over the 3 of them. Soos lumbers in a second later, obviously about to ask what’s going on, but a deliberate cough from Stan cuts him off before he can accidentally make

anything worse.

Ugh. This miserable, awkward, defeated feeling, along with this *heat*—Dipper’s on the verge of dissolving into the floorboards, watching his parents faintly droop further against the table. He’s got to escape. He can’t sit here and stew in yet another loss; that’s not going to do anyone any good, especially Mabel.

Upstairs his work-in-progress Book 3 catalogue lies open on his desk, and in his pocket he just so happens have a little notepad full of information on werewolves that Soos—the only person he could actually confide in when it came to his more ‘out there’ theories on Mabel’s whereabouts—had helped him recall earlier, just waiting to be archived. Seems like the perfect opportunity for a mental escape to him.

Giving his mother one more squeeze, he turns and heads for the stairs, hands deep in the pockets of his shorts. “...I’ll be in the attic if anyone needs me.”

He’s only just walked past a hesitant looking Soos and Stan when his dad’s voice calls out to him. “Hang on Dip, mind sticking around a minute longer? Need to discuss something with you.”

The boy stops in his tracks, taking a long look at the carpet before resignedly turning around. “Sure, what is it?” Then a feeling of uneasiness hits him like a tidal wave, because once he’s facing into the living room again, he realizes everyone else’s eyes are pretty much glued to him, blatant worry written all over their faces. “...What? What’s wrong?”

His dad’s head drops slightly. “I’ll be the first to admit that we should’ve told you before now, it’s just, this last trip... we had more faith riding on it than we should have, and I guess we were, ah. Praying that it wouldn’t actually come to this.”

Okay, scarily beating around the bush should seriously be outlawed. “Woah, Dad, you’re really freaking me out here, what’s going on?”

His parents share a look, both looking more tired and beaten than ever, and then—“I’ll just come out with it. Mom and I can’t miss anymore work, and... you have school starting up next week... we can’t stay in Gravity Falls anymore, kiddo. We’re heading back home this Sunday.”

Wait... *what?*

A beat of silence goes by as they all await his reaction. They're looking at him like he's a ticking time bomb, but right now he's just plain baffled.

"But—but... what about Mabel?" His mother's hand flies up in an attempt to subtly cover her sorrowful face, but Dipper continues to talk anyway, his confusion trumping his usual sensitivity for her. "What about the search? How are we supposed to keep looking for her if we're not here?"

Seriously, this makes zero sense.

"The search'll continue until we find her, Dipper, I promise you, we'll be back here as many times as it takes. In the meantime Detective Hurd and Stan will handle things when we can't be here." His father's eyes glisten, his hands clasped together tightly, and Dipper's not sure who he's trying to convince here—his son, or himself. Either way, looks like he's doing a poor job at both.

Because no. That's not good enough. That plan is nowhere near good enough. They can't just *leave*...

Dipper raises his palms as if the answer were obvious. "Why can't we just move here?"

Finally his mom speaks up, her voice thick and weak. "We... discussed it. But at this point we've got too many things tied up back home. It's—unfortunately it isn't really an option we can afford right now."

"But what about all the donations we got to help find her!" His breath begins to come out faster. "That has to count for something, right?"

His mom shakes her head, and her eyes begin to leak. "I'm sorry, honey... this isn't..." Her voice fizzles out and she blows her nose, and on top of all the disbelief, Dipper feels a stab of guilt in his stomach.

He wildly racks his brain for an answer to all this. But he's blanking, because they both keep staring at him with that look, that broken look that puts him way, way on edge and makes it seem like...

"Why does it feel like we're just... giving up?"

Crap. And now his eyes are glistening, too.

“We’re not giving up, Dip.” His dad’s hand reaches across the table to latch onto his mom’s, who instantly grips back. “Your mother and I, the police, the town... we’re all doing what we can.”

Dipper was never the type of kid to yell at his parents. But his own words of ‘giving up’ have stuck with him, swirling around like a dark cloud over his mind, making him angrier, and angrier, because the more he thinks about it, and no matter what his parents claim this is—this *does* feel like giving up. And doing what they can? *What they can*? This is all for Mabel! They should be going to the ends of the earth, not just doing what they can!

Oh god. Just. This timing. It unnerves the hell out of him. Things have been slowing down around here, haven’t they? It barely even occurred to him before right now, he’s been so wrapped up in his own hunt, in the catalogue, in all his research that’s only just getting started... but now that he thinks of it, when was the last time he went out with a volunteer search party? A few days ago? A week? When was the last time he’d even seen one? What happened to all the effort, all the vigils, even that annoying constant flow of reporters lingering around the Shack, waiting for a word from his parents, or him, or Stan? And even the cops... that detective guy... he used to come by every day. *Every day* cops would be out in the woods, searching, and now...

Dipper’s mouth runs dry. It’s not just his parents. It’s... it’s *everyone*.

He can’t help it anymore; his eyes narrow into slits, on the verge of spilling over. “Well obviously, ‘*what you can*,’ isn’t good enough.”

At the anger and spite laced through his every word, his parents seem to catch onto what he’s getting at. “We’re still working closely with Detective Hurd. But this town doesn’t have the resources to keep up the manpower we had out there in the beginning. We’re running low on resources ourselves. And before you go off on me,” His dad shakes his head, his tone frustrated, “I don’t like the idea of leaving without your sister anymore than you do.”

Dipper’s lips tremble, but he finds his clenched fists loosening. Enough of the rage drains away for him to be able to see his parents clearly for the who they were—two people tied down to one place, while their kid is missing in another, one that’s hundreds of miles away. They look so torn, so broken down...

it's truly unsettling seeing them like this. This plan to leave is so idiotic, his gut basically screaming at him that it's wrong, wrong, *wrong*... but his mom and dad truly believe it's their only option.

There's got to be another way...

And then it clicks.

"I could stay here."

His mother waves him off, squeezing another tissue in between her fingers. "Out of the question, school's starting up in a week."

Dipper takes a deep breath, shaking his head slowly. "No, I mean stay, as in I would go to school here. *Stay* here stay here."

He watches, his hands sweatier than ever, as his parents blink at him in surprise, turn to share a long look with each other, and then glance over to Stan, who just shrugs, his wide eyes amplified by his thick lenses. The teenager's fingers start to twitch nervously inside his pockets; why do adults always insist on treating him like he's not in the room with them?

Not a word was said between his parents at his sudden request, but they both seem to be in heavy agreement when his mom says tentatively, "Dipper... I don't think that's a good idea."

He'd expected as much; luckily while they'd been gaping at him, he'd been quickly putting together a spiel that hopefully would make so much sense that it would just *have* to convince them. "Why not, though? Why is it a bad idea? I'd stay with Grunkle Stan, help keep things going around here... you guys would come up on the weekends... I mean it'd only be temporary, right? This could totally work."

"Dipper, you're not going to move out at age thirteen."

"I told you, it'd only be temporary. Just until we find Mabel. Then we can both come home." A half smile flashes across his face at the thought, but it doesn't last long, because his parents are still shaking their heads at him, looking pained.

That cloud of anger begins to swirl inside him again. They're not even trying to consider this, are they? What, they think he can't handle living without them? He's done it every summer for the past two years! He's so tired of them treating him like this fragile, helpless little kid.

Still coherent enough to know that yelling isn't going to get him what he wants, Dipper tries to take in a calming breath before he continues. "I'll do whatever you want me to do, just let me stay. I can't leave, not yet. I... like, I have a *plan*, a good plan, plus I promised myself I would go out and look for her every day... I can't do any of that if I'm 500 miles away."

Suddenly his mom is burying her forehead in her hand again. "Dipper, honey... think about what you're asking from us."

His feet start to take him back into the room, his hands leaving his pockets to gesture around frantically. "I know what I'm asking! But we're her family, we *can't* just up and leave, like... if there's no way it can be all three of us, at least let it be one. Please."

They've started to avoid his eyes now, the word 'no,' still written all over their faces, and he's running out of ways to convince them. In a last ditch resort, Dipper wheels around to the old man still sitting quietly in the armchair, now praying for a rescue.

"Stan. Grunkle Stan, please. You gotta tell them it's okay to let me stay. Please. *Please.*"

But his great uncle drops his desperate gaze just like his parents had. "Sorry kid," he says, trying to mask the sadness in his voice by making it extra gruff. "It's not up to me."

*What is wrong with you people!* Dipper wants to scream. Didn't they understand that not only would this plan work, but that he *needs* this? He can't go back home without Mabel. Is he the only one that gets that that's like... that's basically like accepting defeat! Something he will never *ever* do. What, were they waiting for him to get down on his knees and *beg*?

Well, whether they wanted it or not, they're getting it, since next thing he knows, Dipper is crouched down in front of Mom, her hand tight in his, their eyes locked. "I can't leave without her. I'm not going home without her, I'll be

miserable there, I *know* it. Please, let me stay. I can keep looking, I can keep things going while you guys aren't around. I'll do whatever it takes, just... please. I'll find her, I know I can find her. But I can't if I'm not *here*..."

He finally cuts himself off, watching her face with wide, hopeful eyes. She can't say no to that. She just can't.

But...

She is. She's shaking her head. Whispering to him that she's sorry. A disbelieving tear escapes down the side of his face, and he drops her hand to angrily wipe it away. Dipper gets back to his feet, glowering down at both his parents, taking a step back when his mom reaches out to him. He can't believe neither of them gets it. *Neither of them*. This is so fucking ludicrous.

"You know what? I don't care what you do. But *I*," the now livid teenager jabs a pointer finger hard into his own chest, "am not going anywhere until I find my sister. And you can't stop me."

Except they can, and they will, Dipper thinks miserably as he stomps his way out of the living room and up the rickety stairs, a few more tears spilling out of his narrowed eyes.

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Back and forth, he paces across the attic floor, arms folded across his chest, occasionally swiping away any more wetness that dared to leak down his cheeks. Geez, why did he always have to be such a crybaby? No wonder no one ever took him seriously!

The attic is supposed to be his getaway (well, sort of, bearing in mind that half of it is still filled with her things), but it's 10 times hotter up here than it is downstairs or even outside. He's practically choking on the air rather than breathing it, the chest and armpits and back of his shirt drenched with dark sweat stains. Tearing the hat off his head, he flings it over to his bedspread, the hat missing its target by an inch and fluttering to the floor. Dipper doesn't bother to pick it up, only resumes his heated pacing.

He still can't believe this. 15 minutes ago, he'd actually had that inkling of hope that he might see her today, and now? Now his parents might as well be throwing in the metaphorical towel, because they want move back home without



Mabel. And they're forcing him into it, too. They're letting everyone in town just give up, leaving everything in the hands of that incompetent detective.

Are they crazy? Have they gone completely insane? They're never going to find Mabel that way; it's now clear that that guy is looking in all the wrong places.

Spinning around to march back across the room for the fiftieth time, his eyes fall on the open book 3 catalogue on his desk. The boy lets a frustrated noise leave his throat, his head falling back to look fiercely at the ceiling. It can't be a coincidence that she disappeared in Gravity Falls. It *can't*. There's too much unexplained weirdness going on around here for it to be a *normal* kind of disappearance. She's still close by, he can feel it, and if he just had the time to properly look... they have to understand that!

No. To hell with this, they're not moving him out of here. This isn't over.

His cheeks and ears red hot, his facial features unyielding, Dipper yanks the door to the attic back open, almost accidentally taking the old thing off its hinges; he steals one last glance over his shoulder at Mabel's untouched bed before slamming it behind him.

Striding over to the top of the stairs, he pauses there for a second to inhale, organize his thoughts, try and push down the anger. He's got to keep a level head. Be calm, but firm. Get them to see what a huge mistake this is. *Make* them listen. Argue his point all night, if he has to.

He takes the stairs two at a time, a hair away from tripping on an untied shoelace near the top. He shakes it off. Nothing is going to hinder him, not until their minds are changed.

But when he reaches the landing before the last stretch of stairs, the sound of low voices waft in from the living room, freezing him up. And after listening in for a few moments, stock still, barely breathing, Dipper finds himself slowly lowering himself down to take a seat on a step, rather than charging down into the room headstrong.

“—no way to know how long that'll be, if it even...”

“I get that. We'll test it out. And If you think it's not working, he moves back

home.”

“Uncle Stan... I can’t ask you to—”

“And I’m telling ya, it’s fine Charlie. I can take care of the kid. Done it before, I’ll do it again.”

“Me too dudes. Dipper’s pretty much like, y’know, my kid bro at this point. Whatever he needs, I’m there.”

There’s a pang in Dipper’s chest, but it’s the good kind, one that desiccates the boiling anger and anxiety, replacing it with a quiet warmth that proceeds to spread all over his body. Never before had he felt such immense appreciation for his cranky great uncle and his maturity-stunted friend—who is he kidding, one of his best friends. He leans his head against the peeling wallpaper, continuing to listen as Stan and Soos make a case for him to stay, doing a better job than he ever could have.

A tiny smile comes to his face when eventually, the worries are quelled for the time being, and his parents give in.

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Three days later, the heat wave has lifted, the room where his parents had been staying is back to being Soos’ break room, and the Volvo is packed up tight for the 9-hour drive down to Piedmont. After a lot of hugs and tears, his mom and dad finally get in the car, leaving Dipper standing on the back porch of the Shack, Stan, Soos and Wendy flanked on either side of him.

The engine starts up, and the teenager lifts his hand in a motionless wave, only letting it drop after the car has already been out of sight for a good five seconds.

Wow. They’re actually gone.

Not that he’s not going to see them this weekend or anything, when they return with a carload of his stuff, but... it’s just a weird feeling. Summer is coming to a close, and he’s still here. He lives here. It’s so funny to him that there was a point in time when all he wanted to do was leave this place, and now, he lives here.

There are a bunch of conditions to him officially moving into the Mystery Shack. He has to check in with his parents every day; he has to step back and allow Detective Hurd to do his job (which shouldn't be a problem, since he barely sees the dude anyway). He has to start talking to a professional every other week... he wasn't so thrilled about that one. But therapy is equivalent with staying, so, whatever. He'll suck it up. Last but not least, he'll be starting eighth grade at Gravity Falls Middle on Monday. Soos is going to drive him to the end of the dirt road every morning so he can catch the bus.

And in the meantime, he's free to focus on the only thing he cares about right now—finding Mabel.

Stan, whose hand had been resting on Dipper's shoulder as his parents had driven out of sight, removes it to clap his hands together. "Alright, I got a bus full of suckers due any minute. Soos, the 6-packalope still needs patchin' up. Get on that."

"You got it Mr. Pines."

"Wendy, get back to your counter so I can continue to pay you to do absolutely nothing."

"Aye aye." The older girl grins and gives a lazy salute, then hops off the porch to stroll around to the gift shop entrance.

Finally, Grunkle Stan rounds on him, his arms crossed.

"So. Guess you're headed off into the woods then, or to go stick your nose in all those papers you're always messin' around with."

Dipper shrugs, scratching the back of his neck. "I could hang around here for awhile, if you need the help."

Stan nods, flipping down his fake eye patch. "Good, you're offering. Now I don't have to make you. There's some unpacking that needs doing in the gift shop. Go on, scat, er whatever."

Hands in the pockets of his vest, Dipper rolls his eyes good-naturedly, heading down the steps and in the direction Wendy had gone. After a few paces he stops suddenly and turns around to face the porch where his great uncle is still

standing, all kinds of words dancing around behind his lips. “Hey... Stan? I uh, I just wanted to say—”

The old man cuts him off. “Don’t mention it, kid. Least I could do.” And he disappears back inside the house, leaving Dipper standing alone in the grass, a grateful smile on his face.

## Part 6

There's seven darves right? Hmm.

Happy, Mopey, Grumpy, Dopey... Wait, Mopey isn't a darf. Or is he? Happy and Grumpy for sure though. Grumpy grump grump bear.

Huh, that still leaves two more. No wait. Happy, Mopey, Grumpy, Dopey... That's four, meaning that there's... Three more. Uh... Sleepy? And there was that one that blushed a lot. What was his name? Shy Guy? Pfft, no. Um... Bashful. Yeah, that's it! And then there's Sneezy... And the leader dude. Ol' Papa Smurf.

Doc. His name is Doc.

So that's Happy, Mopey, Grumpy, Dopey, Sleepy, Bashful, Sneezy, and Doc!

...What the hey hey, that's *eight* little miner dudes!

Mabel shrugs, mentally tallying them up again as she glances over the fresh dirt in her nails.

"Whistle while you work," Mabel sings, forcing herself to smile as her fingers dig back into the soil of the wall. She whistles the merry tune. The young teen has been steadily scratching at the wall, the glowing crystal inside it proving to be massive.

Her new escape plan is actually just her old one.

Dig out the gem, and use it to light her way as she runs the heck out of here.

She's been digging on and off for a while now. A while. Mabel pouts, her whistling dying out. She honestly isn't certain how long she's been down here. She couldn't sleep that first (second?) night. Svooth tucked her in two more times after that, each time sleep had avoided her and she spent the night picking at the crystal. But then Mabel couldn't *stop* falling asleep, much to Svooth's liking.

"What a good baby," Svooth had cooed one night over dinner with an

amused giggle. Mabel's chipped plate, the bloody pile of unknown mush left untouched yet again, was pushed far to the side. Her head rested on the cold, rotted wood of Svooth's dining table. Weary eyes strained to stay open as her stomach growled. "Sleeping the day away."

Svooth stopped tucking Mabel into bed though, opting to let the girl sleep as she pleased. So any semblance of keeping track of the time is lost on the brunette.

But it feels like she's been down here forever!

Mabel blinks away a tear, shaking her head when she realizes that she's been staring blankly at the dull glow of the crystals. "It hasn't been that long," she reassures herself, and goes back to digging. But that helpless feeling in her gut teeters about. Her fingers move at a sluggish pace until they simply stop clawing at the hard dirt.

Mabel taps the large gem on one of its irregular, jagged points. How is she even going to be able to carrying this thing? It's large, and pointy, and by the looks of it, mega heavy. Could she even run with this big hunk of shiny rock?

Mabel sighs, flopping back off her knees to sit defeated on the floor.

Her flawless plan is getting more and more flaws... It's not even a plan really. More like a checklist, if anything. But it's not like she's super brainy. Heck, if it was Dipper down here, he had probably already cooked up some overly complicated scheme to bust out days ago, the dirt walls covered in equations.

She smiles for a moment, envisioning him beside her, holding her hand. She can almost hear his voice, promising her that they'll make it out together, or making some lame joke that'll make her snort and roll her eyes and briefly forget that some monster lady is holding them captive.

But Dipper isn't here.

She may not even see him again...

Mabel shakes her head once again to erase the disheartening thoughts as if her mind was an Etch a Sketch. No, her plan may not be the best one ever. But at

least she's doing something!

"Pfft. Mabel girl, stop ackin' all cray cray," she chuckles weakly to herself. "It'll work out. Me and the bro bro will be chillin' like villains together in no time."

Though that tinge of helplessness never quite leaves her gut, she starts humming a song and dives back into chucking dirt.

It takes her a while to notice that she's humming the lamby lamby dance song. The image of a six-year-old Dipper, all decked out in his little lamb costume, marching around the living room pops into her head. She giggles, tearing away at the clumps of dirt with more ferocity.

"So march, march march around daisies! And don't don't don't forget about the baaaaaaaabies!"

"Child!" an annoyed Svooth growls, storming inside Mabel's little nook of a room. Mabel squeaks and jolts around, jabbing her back into the protruding gem, desperately hiding the carved in wall. "Cease that insufferable racket this instant! Ya drivin' me up ah wall!"

Mabel nods dumbly with wide eyes.

Her heart feels like its about to leap out her chest!

"If I wanted ta hear high pitched hummin' an' singin', I wouldn't live so far away from them blasted tweety boids," Svooth scoffs, her second left leg twitching as she turns to leave. "How many times must I say it? Be seen, not heard, Baby Doll."

She takes a few steps, but stops. Mabel squints, struggling to make out her new caretaker's outline.

"In fact, why don't ya come sit with ya mama?"

Mabel inwardly groans as Svooth walks away without waiting for an answer.

Easing up on to her feet, Mabel counts under her breath with each step she takes. The first time Mabel bumped into something in the burrow, Svooth had

laughed and called her clumsy.

The second and third time, the mole creature bellowed out an annoyed hiss. Mabel adjusted rather quickly to the darkness of her temporary prison. She learned the exact amount of steps it takes to get to the ice box lining the wall (filled with foul smelling things she refuses to eat until her stomach practically demands it) in that shamble of a kitchen, and remembering to hop over the crack in the floor that's in front of the pit she's been using as a toilet.

Bumping into things accidentally isn't much of a problem. Because the fourth time Mabel knocked into something, it had toppled over and shattered.

Mabel absent mindedly rubs the bruise on her upper left arm, strolling inside Svooth's room and making a beeline towards the bed. Svooth is sitting in front of a large vanity mirror, brushing her white, wiry whiskers into curls.

"Baby doll?" Svooth calls after a few minutes of silence. Mabel bounces upright on the old lopsided mattress. "Won't ya fetch Mama her sweater?"

A bitter heat trickles over Mabel's dirt crusted skin. She fumbles back on her feet, groping her surroundings until she feels the soft yarn of the pink striped sweater. Mabel frowns, but she eases through the darkness to the sweater's new owner.

Svooth expectantly extends a long, pointed finger for which Mabel hangs the garment. The woman swiftly retracts the finger, flinging the garb over her shoulders and tying the sleeves into a neat knot at the scoop of her neck. Mabel watches as Svooth hums in approval in the cracked mirror, barely able to make out the mole woman's prideful smile in the fragmented glass.

"Baby doll," Svooth says as she turns to face the young girl, cold paws draping around Mabel's frame. "Yer Mama wishes to apologize to ya."

"Oh?"

Mabel blinks, brows rising in surprise. Svooth nods with a tentative smile.

"I shouldn't have yelled at ya fer singing. Now ya'll know I'm not a fan of noise."



Mabel nods, sweeping her eyes down to purple ring around her wrist.

“But I actually do enjoy music,” Svooth continues. “I just...” She trails off for a moment, biding time with gentle caresses as her blue eyes wistfully glance over Mabel’s features. “We’re pretty isolated, in my burrow, I mean. But folks are talking, and if someone were to hear ya while I was out, some trifling little thing might come sniffing around for ya.”

Mabel’s eyes widen at the thought. Stupefied, the girl begins to sway. The memory of a mole man towering over her cowering body, his wet nose blowing hot air in her face, makes Mabel’s blood freezes in her veins. She’s certain she’s turned into ice sculpture, and at any second she’ll crack in half. Mabel’s knees feel weak, and she gapes at Svooth, mouth opening but producing no sound.

Svooth then smiles, pressing a finger to her full lips. “*Shhh*. So we’ll be quite from now on, right child?”

She must not be made of ice after all, since Mabel feels herself nodding, her body getting pulled into a full embrace by the lesser of two evils.

“No need to fret, child,” Mama whispers into Mabel’s ear, picking her up like a babe and carrying her into the living room. It felt oddly comforting, being in the woman’s arms. Her fur is soft, despite the soft layer of dust. It felt like being wrapped in cool velvet. “Now let me show you some real music.”

Mabel’s placed on her feet, and she blinks a few times with the strain on her eyes softening from the glowing gems. Svooth’s record player is an old, beat up box. But the mole woman beams as she pulls out a vinyl, and gently places the needle on the record.

Svooth spins dramatically at the start of the song, a trumpet matching her every move. Even the bounce of her hair is in tune to the old jazzy beat.

A small smile curves Mabel’s lips. Images of Svooth, young and alone, practicing this perfectly choreographed dance for hours on end flood the teen’s mind. *Svooth* tripping up on one of her eight legs, and having to start again; singing at the top of her lungs, and improvising winks and blown kisses between movements to an imaginary, yet adoring, crowd...

A giggle bubbles out of Mabel’s throat, and before she could register just

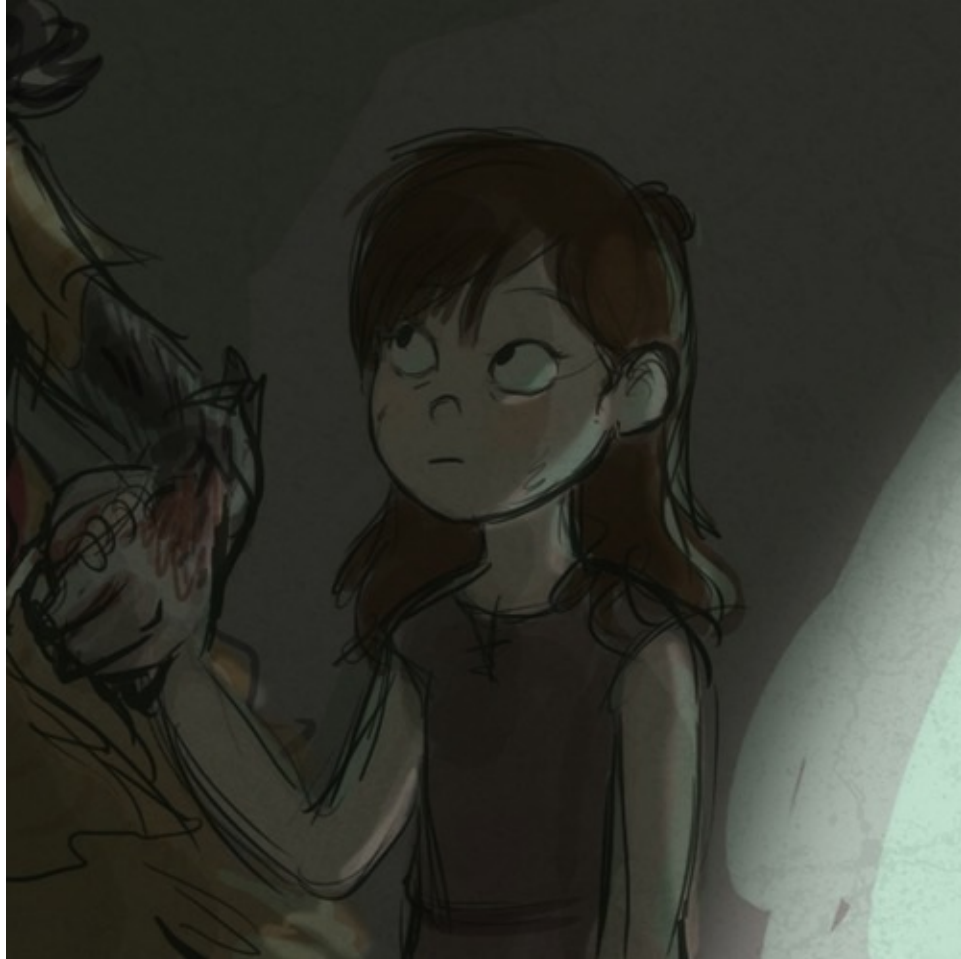
how odd it sounded for her to laugh, here and now, Mama takes hold of her hand, and Mabel is suddenly swept up in a swinging dance.

They spin and twirl together, bodies moving freely about their home. Mabel sashay's in circle like a bluesy lounge singer, with Mama playing along. Hips sway as they break apart. Exuberant laughter bounces off the dirt walls as Mama shimmies with gusto, the sleeves of the pink sweater flapping wildly.

Mabel cabbage patches her way towards Mama's open arms, the older woman giving her a queer yet amused look before lifting Mabel up. Brown tresses whirls behind her as Mama spins Mabel around. Mama's eyes sparkle, a happy grin on her face as she swings Mabel around and around. A strange glee flutters into Mabel's chest, and her dark eyes close. Mabel grins widely, enjoying the feeling of being spun in the air at such a carefree speed. The cool wind tickles her skin. If she concentrates hard enough, she can almost feel the sun, and it's like she's flying in the sky. Her and every bird to flap their wing towards the clouds are one.

But then there's a knock at the door, and Mabel's back on her feet, back underground with hundreds of spider mole people aching to nibble on her Mabelicious flesh.

Mabel stumbles a bit, a tad dizzy from the spin. The sun and sky are far from her mind as glassy eyes blankly watch the wood's movement with each knock, her trembling hand griping tightly onto Mama's old fashioned dress.



The record scratches, the song ending and plummeting the burrow into silence, sans the rampant beating on the door.

“Mama?” a shaky, uncertain voice whispers, and it takes Mabel a moment to realize that small voice is her own. She glances up to Mama for guidance and... Wait. Mama? When did she start thinking of Svooth by that blasted moniker? Come on, Mabel girl.

Mabel shakes her head, releasing her grip on the woman’s dress and looking away from Svooth grimacing at the door.

The mole woman pats Mabel’s head, and softly commands, “Hide.”

So Mabel ducks into her little room, peering out to watch Svooth stroll to the door.

“Mistah Mayor!” Svooth gasps in delight as she swings open the door.

“What a fine surprise fer ya ta come all this way to visit.”

The Mayor, as far as Mabel could see, is a massive man. Round with his fat legs tucked around him, barely moving as his feet tap and flitter his giant body inside the burrow.

“Don’t be givin’ me those wolf spider eyes, Svooth!” he quickly admonishes, though the honeyed drawl of his accent took away any kind of bite. “Ya’ll know very well why I’m here.”

“I reckon it’s because you’ve gotten bored, and thought you’d spice up your day by visiting an old friend,” Svooth replies, her voice light and teasing. “Tell me, how is your wife?”

For some reason this question makes the Mayor sputter, affronted.

“And your kids,” Svooth continues. “Are they all as amazing as you’d hoped?”

“Now Svoo—”

“I bet none of them dance. Oh Tch, remember how we use to dance together.”

Tch, the Mayor, chuckles fondly at the memory. But he quickly coughs, and straightens up. But Svooth is humming a tune, gently swaying her way back to her record player.

“Now don’t you go an’ try to distract me, woman. You stole from the Reapers, and those boys ain’t happy bout that. Ya made ‘em look a fool, chasing ya all through the caverns. And they’ve been houndin’ *me* because of it.”

Svooth shrugs with scoff. “Oh quit frettin’. Those Reapers ain’t nothin’ bout a bunch of hoodlums. They like to act tough, but they gonna do nothin’. Ya know, I liked it a lot better when the things that came down the hole was a free-for-all. That little mob monopolizing on it is so... untasteful,” she says, daintily fingering through her small album collection before finding the one she wants, and seconds later the strum of an acoustic guitar fills the underground home. “And theft is beneath me, Mistah. I would’ve thought ya’ll knew a lady such as myself doesn’t need to steal to feed herself.”

“Svooth, this is serious,” the Mayor huffs as the woman slowly, almost sensually, dances back over to him. She smiles teasingly, batting her eyelashes.

“Can’t be *that* serious if it took ya so long to come see about me.”

*Tomorrow Night... Will you remember what you said tonight*

The crooning male voice on the record begins to sing, and Svooth sings along with him. She eases her arms around the Mayor, and with no effort at all the two begin to sway to the dulcet tune.

*Tomorrow Night... Will all the thrills be gone  
Tomorrow Night... Will it just be another memory  
Or just another lovely song, that’s in my heart to linger on*

Mabel wiggles in her spot, watching the two rock together. Svooth resting her head on the Mayor’s shoulder, fingers caressing the man’s furry face.

“It’s been so long,” Svooth sighs, and the Mayor hums his agreement. “Now Mistah Mayor, ain’t this nice?”

He responds by holding her tighter, nuzzling his head to hers.

“Ya know, a woman can get mighty lonesome,” she whispers, Mabel barely hearing the woman over the music. “Everyone deserves love. Everyone deserves a family’s love. Daddy did his best, I’m sure, but it wasn’t enough for me... And isn’t that why you married her, and not me? So you can have the little ones?”

“Now Svooth—”

“No, no. I’m not being spiteful, I promise. I’m sayin’ I understand now,” she reiterates. “And don’t *I* deserve a child as much as you or anybody else?”

“A... child?” The Mayor pulls back, a bewildered look upon his face. “What does this have to do with the food you stole?”

“Like I said, a lady such as me doesn’t need to sink to thievery for substance.”

Svooth easily breaks out of his embrace, turning her head in the direction of

Mabel's little hole in the wall. "Baby doll, come on out and meet Mistah Mayor."

Woah, what? Has Svooth gone *completely* into a cockatoo's nest?

But despite her trepidation, Mabel balls her trembling hands into steady fists and walks over out to them. She makes a conscious effort to stop a good couple of feet away from the large man. Not that it does her any good, because his feet flitters over to her the moment she stops walking.

"Oh my," he says in amazement, jagged claws poking her doughy sides, as if testing if she's tender. And gosh darnnit, she is!

"She's the pride and joy of my collection," Svooth tells him. "Isn't she magnificent? I've been longing for her for awhile now, and heaven finally answered my prayers."

"Hm, yes," he mumbles contemplatively. Mabel's skin crawls at the feel of paws, his heavy gaze on her body unwavering. She already felt unsettled, but then his fingers cup around her waist. She jumps back, but he's undeterred, leaning in to poke her hipbone with his jagged claw. Ow. "A lovely plaything. If anyone would have her, she'd be excellent for child bearing."

Woah! What? Mabel jolts back again, stomach churning. To heck and back with that, Mister! Seriously, ew. And is that even possible? She doesn't want to find out. She'd rather be dinner!

And if he pokes her hip bone one more time, she's going to sock him into next week. Rather that invoke Svooth's anger or not, it'll be worth it.

"Baby doll ain't evah gettin' married," Mama clarifies, her voice becoming dark for the first time since the Mayor's arrival. "And she ain't a plaything. She's my baby."

"Shame," he states, his meaty fingers entwined in Mabel's tresses. "So soft. So pretty. I can see what drew you to her. Such delectable features... It really would be a travesty to see her on the cutting block."

Cutting block?

“Exactly,” Svooth says, stepping in between the inspecting mole man and Mabel. Mama’s legs stretch out protectively in front of Mabel, and the young teen quickly notices the limbs twitch; a sign Mabel knows to mean Svooth’s irritated. Mabel breathes a little easier with Svooth blocking the Mayor, relieved being a creeper isn’t condoned down here. Taking in Svooth’s defensive stance, the Mayor takes a few steps back, coughing and straightening back up into a proper demeanor.

“But the problem still remains, Svooth,” he says. “Me sharing your appreciation for the things of the upper world doesn’t change the fact that the Reapers are—”

“Oh please. I’m sure Kurvt’s been bucking for a promotion in the Reapers,” Svooth interrupts him, her voice becoming mockingly sweet. “I’m sure a flea ridden scoundrel like him would love to knock whoever’s whining about this out the way so he can move up in ranks.”

Mabel didn’t fully get what all they were talking about, but she got the gist. She’s either going to be dragged onto someone’s dinner plate, or she’s going to stay here with Svooth. So Mabel stares at the Mayor, heart pounding as he thinks over Svooth’s words.

“Well, I guess that’ll get ‘em off my back,” he mumbles. “But that girl of yours would’ve been a fine payday for them. It may not be so easy.”

“Oh for goodness sake. Baby doll was mine the moment she landed in the Burrows. If things go left on ya with Kurvt, you can tell all those hoodlums I would love to see them try and take her back.”

The Mayor chuckles a deep belly laugh, his body jiggling like jelly. He then nods, smirking.

“If they were willing to face ya, then they wouldn’t be bothering *me*, now would they?”

Svooth flashes a knowing grin before she begins to wave him off.

“If that is all, I’d like to go on about my day, Tch.”

He tips his head in a silent so long, moving towards the door. Svooth follows

behind him, lifting a hand to signal to Mabel to stay put.

“Now Svooth, you do have all the necessities for her, don’t you?” he asks once they reach the door.

“Now, Mistah Mayor, don’t tell me you’re worried about us.”

“Ya know I care fer ya, Svooth. I just want to make sure you know what you’re doing. They’re not like us. They need different things, and I would hate if she withered away on ya.”

Svooth frowns at that, glaring.

“Don’t worry, I know just as much as you.”

“Yes, well... I’ll come see you again sometime soon,” he promises, brazenly diving in for a kiss.

“Good day, Mistah.”

“Good day,” he says as he leaves. The door is then shut, and Svooth laughs her way back to the record player, playing a new song to groove to.

“Go on, child,” Svooth says with a wave of her hand. “Do as you please.”

For some reason Mabel feels compelled to stay in the room with Svooth. Swaying much more reservedly than she had been earlier, Mabel watches Svooth dance until falling asleep.

When Mabel wakes up she’s in her bed pile of moss and leaves. Svooth must have tucked her in. She opens her eyes, and immediately closes them. Goodness, it’s kind of bright in here. Wait, what?

Mabel bolts up, leaves scattering. The crystal she’s been digging at has been extracted and broken. Shards line the walls, illuminating her surroundings a million times better. It’s still rather dark, but it’s a definite improvement. It’s kind of like looking at twinkling stars. She walks along the wall in amazement, until there’s a loud crunch underfoot, and she takes a step back. She gasps.

She hit the jackpot.



A travel sized toothbrush and paste. A bottle of water. A half empty box of tampons. Clean under wear! And also what she had stepped on, a bag of Corncornos.

Her stomach growls, and she falls to her knees. She rips the bag open, not caring how it got there as she devours the nacho chips.

“I see you found your gifts,” Svooth says out of no where, making Mabel hack and cough on her chips in surprise. She’s about to hide the bag of salty, triangle goodness into her white undershirt when Svooth’s words register.

These were... gifts? From Svooth?

“Mama takes care of her baby just fine, don’t I?” Svooth says pridefully.

Mabel nods. “Yeah,” she chimes in to humor the woman before scarfing down more chips. Her eyes go back to the wall of shards. Easily extractable shards. Oh wow!

“Yeah,” Mabel mutters softly in disbelief. “Yeah, ya certainly did.”

## Part 7

In no time at all he catches up to the runaway piece of paper, which had trapped itself against a tree branch. Not bothering to look at its contents, he swipes it up from the ground, walking it back over to the small girl, who now looks more fidgety than ever.

The way Candy is looking at him reminds him of a scared animal. He raises an eyebrow, but nonetheless extends the paper out in her direction. “Here,” he says genially.

“Um... thank you,” is her almost inaudible reply as she nervously moves forward to take it.

Right before she can grab hold of it however, the wind flips the paper over in his hand, revealing... his name?

Curiosity finally gets the better of him, and he abruptly draws it back towards himself, hearing both girls gasp as he unfurls the crinkled edges to get a proper look at what they’ve been so damn interested in lately.

The top reads ‘*Dipper Dibz!*’ in ridiculously schwoopy handwriting. Beneath that are two columns, both headed by hearts with arrows through them, although one of the hearts contains ‘*Dipper x Candy*’ while the other has a more firm looking ‘*Dipper x Grenda.*’ And underneath all of that are tallies, lots and lots of tallies marked into each column—some of the tallies have little notes written beside them too, like ‘hands touched for 3 seconds straight,’ or ‘smiled at me’ or ‘thinks my muscles are cool.’ If all that wasn’t bad enough, hearts of all shapes and sizes have been scribbled all over the page, and... woah woah, wait, is that creepy ass drawing surrounded by sparkles at the bottom supposed to be of him?

The longer he looks at it, the hotter his cheeks become, the harder his eyebrows knit together, and the more fuming disbelief he feels.

They’ve *got* to be kidding. Please someone tell him they’re kidding...

“What the heck is this?” He has to ask, sincerely hoping he’s mistaken. He finally wills himself to look over at them; Candy has shrunk into her jacket,

her entire face a bright pink, while Grenda just continues to stand there and stare at him, her mouth hanging open. Both of them look guilty. Oh geez, they aren't kidding, are they?

"Uhm, *hello?* Any day now," he snaps, waving the paper around in the windy air.

"It was like—it was just a little game we were playing!" Grenda finally steps up, rolling her eyes exaggeratedly, clearly trying hard to play it off like it's no big deal. Candy nods vigorously in agreement, only her eyes and nose now visible from how far she has sunk into her scarf.

Their explanation doesn't help, though. In fact, all it does is get his blood boiling, his eyes narrowing severely. Because a game? This is a *game* to them?

"I'm sorry, I wasn't aware we were out here to play games!" Dipper takes a challenging step forward, making Candy jump, and gestures furiously at the forest around them. "Do either of you even care about Mabel, about *any* of this?"

Candy just nods harder, her eyes becoming big and glossy, while Grenda bristles, her voice now defensive. "How can you even ask that, she's our best friend! Of course we do!"

"No, you don't! Because if you did you'd be spending your time out here looking for her, not giggling like idiots over some pathetic list about—about—" Wow, he can't even say it... oh, come on. They're supposed to be the ones floundering around in embarrassment, not him. They're the ones who made the stupid thing!

"Hey, we were just having a little fun, it wasn't hurting anyone! You need to take a major chill pill—"

"*We're not out here to have fun!* Get it through your fucking heads!" he snarls, the aggressive edge in his voice echoing through the tree trunks.

The two of them simply gape at him. A few tears gather in Grenda's eyes; Candy is now visibly sniffing. But he doesn't feel bad for them. And he doesn't care if he's overreacting. He has every right to overreact! Mabel's been gone for nearly 4 months now, and all her so called 'friends' care about is which one of them gets to date her brother—which is a pretty freaking bogus concept in itself!

The mere notion motivates him to open his mouth again in disgust. “And—you’re wasting your time anyway, ‘cause there is *no* way in hell that I would ever go out with either one of you!” As he spits out the words he coldly rips the paper in two and lets the wind carry the pieces out of his hands. Then the words run out and he just stands there, bright red and breathing hard. After a few more seconds of teary-eyed gawking, the larger girl rises taller and balls her huge hands into fists, an admittedly intimidating glower on her face (he has to shake the urge to take a step back, for his pride’s sake).

“Yeah? Well the feeling’s now mutual, buddy! Come on, Candy, we’re leaving!” She grabs her shaking friend by the hand and almost drags her to the ground by accident as she begins stalking in the direction they came from, thick ponytail bouncing in her wake. A bulky finger rises in the air as Grenda twists around to glare at him with a final glare. “We don’t need your know-it-all help anymore, we’ll search by ourselves!”

Dipper raises a furious brow. *Know-it-all help?* What’s that supposed to mean?

He keeps rooted to his spot, still steaming mad, as he watches the outlines of Mabel’s friends get smaller and smaller and finally disappear through the dense pine needles. When they’re out of sight he hears one last faint call of, “And I take back everything I said about you being cute!” Then, it’s just him, the trees, and the wind.

*Good riddance*, he thinks bitterly, his legs moving to take him deeper into the woods. He’s... he’s more productive without them, anyway.

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By the time the light starts to drain from the sky, forcing him to turn back, Dipper is chilled to the bone. Cheeks pink from the unrelenting wind, fingers numb in his sweatshirt pocket, legs frozen inside his jeans. He keeps failing at dressing warmly enough for the weather here, not yet adjusted to the unpleasant cold. And if this is what November weather is like in Oregon, he doesn’t even want to know how December’s going to be. Or January, or...

He bites his cracked lip, faintly tasting blood. Hopefully it won’t come to that. Hopefully he and Mabel will be spending Christmas together back home in California with their parents. That’s the plan, anyway. A hard gust of wind forces

his eyes shut and his fingers to cross inside his pocket. Until then, please, please let her be somewhere warm, wherever she is... or warm enough, at least...

Even after looking on his own for hours, he didn't find any wormholes today. He sighs heavily, his breath barely visible in the twilight. There's always tomorrow. Admittedly he hadn't covered as much ground as he would usually be capable of; he'd been sort of distracted. They weren't even there to giggle behind him, and they *still* managed to distract him. What fresh madness is this?

Truthfully, he'd been reliving the madness all afternoon, secondhand embarrassment curling his face into a cringe every few trees or so. Enough of the anger has faded away for him to feel a little bit guilty about the whole thing—he certainly hadn't *meant* to make them cry. He just doesn't understand it when people don't take this situation as seriously as he does. It pisses him off. Makes him blow up at people, evidently. Because they should. They should be taking it just as seriously.

Anyway. It was probably safe to say that that'd been his last search with Grenda and Candy. How the trio they had going on there ended up being dismantled due to the fact that they'd both harbored crushes for him was so odd to think about. Shouldn't there have been some signs, or something? Or, maybe there had been, he just hadn't noticed. Not his fault though, he's a fairly preoccupied person these days. No time for stuff like girls.

Oy. At some point his brain had actually tried to visualize what it would be like to be in a relationship with either one of them. But then Dipper had just ended up cringing again. Yaaaah, no.

The lights from the Shack come into view just as nightfall fully descends, and the 14-year-old inwardly rejoices, his teeth chattering. When he bursts through the back door, Grunkle Stan's sitting in his armchair watching TV, while Wendy and Soos sit at the table playing some card game. They all greet him casually as he walks in and slumps down on top of the T-rex head coffee table.

"Welp," he sighs, dumping his backpack on the floor, then untying his hood and letting it fall around his shoulders. "I made a couple of girls cry today."

"What'd ya do, show 'em your collection of 80's pop CDs?" Stan grunts, not looking away from the screen.

“No.”

“Well then spill, man,” Wendy prompts when he doesn’t immediately give an explanation.

“Umm...” Dipper keeps his eyes glued to the hideous shag carpet, concentrating on rubbing some of the feeling back into his hands. “I kind of found out both Candy and Grenda like... wanted to go out with me or whatever, and I may or may not have shut them down. Prettty harshly.”

A chorus of “Oooooo!” breaks out in the living room from each member of his makeshift family, making him go crimson again.

“Geez Dip, two girls’ hearts crushed in one day, didn’t know you had so much game.” Wendy laughs, shooting a finger gun at him. Since the joke came from her, Dipper waits for the embarrassment to set in, but none comes—he just finds himself chuckling along with her, shrugging sheepishly. Huh. Either his old crush on her is in a long remission or something (because he doesn’t have time for girls right now), or possibly... it doesn’t even exist anymore? Eh. He’ll figure it out later.

“‘Course my bro’s got game,” pipes Soos, crossing his arms and nodding proudly. “Dipper the heartbreaker, yeah! Uh, that’s unfortunate about the crying, though.”

“Yeah. Still feel sorta bad about that part—”

“Woah woah woah,” Stan butts in. “They wanted to go out with *you*? Dipper? Same kid who forgets to put on deodorant and always sings along to the *Fresh Prince* theme song in that squeaky voice?”

“I don’t forget to put on deodorant!” The boy shrewdly lifts his arm up a little ways, takes a tiny whiff, and blushes. “...Except for today. Wow I’m gross.”

“Take pride in it kid, you come from a long line of gross,” Stan says, scratching at the unruly chest hair that juts out from beneath his undershirt.

Soos laughs at the comment, then flings his arm straight in the air and quite obviously scrapes at his armpit for a good 5 seconds, a relieved noise sighing out

of him. Dipper and Stan stay silent while Wendy raises an eyebrow, and the heavysset man shrugs in response. “Oh. I thought this was a thing we were all doing. Being gross n’ stuff. ‘M I wrong? Are we not doin’ that?”

There’s a pause, then Wendy stands from the table and begins pulling on her jacket. “Aaand that’s my cue. I’m out, ‘chall.” The tall redhead makes her way out of the living room, but stops in the doorway and turns around as if having a second thought. “Oh, hey, Dip. Headed to meet Nate and the Thompsinator at the diner, you want in? You look like you could use some greasy food, after the day you had.”

She sniggers, and Dipper grins, perking up in his seat slightly. Wendy has been inviting him out with her after hours more and more lately, much to his delight; it’s a great temporary escape, plus, he doesn’t really get out much socially around here—hanging out with her and her friends makes him feel like he actually *has* friends. “Ugh, yes. Take me with you. Please.”

“Schaa-weet. We’re outta here, then. Later guys.” She disappears from the doorway, and Dipper bounds after her, replacing his hood on his head and waving goodbye to Stan and Soos. Once again he finds himself outside braving the glacial wind, eager for Wendy to blast the heater along with the music in her old junker of a car as they speed to their destination. Also eager to wolf down a warm, delicious, double bacon cheeseburger, and *more* than eager to start the process of forgetting about this weird, awkward day.

But his brain is a jerk, and as he’s getting in the car, the image of Grenda’s puckered, icky lip-gloss smeared lips looming towards him pops up out of nowhere. At least the wind is there to cover up his girly shriek.

## Part 8

It hit her, like, *really* hit her, on the day she tried to stick her feet in her shoes, and they wouldn't fit.

It'd been awhile since she'd worn them. She had no reason to, really, because she never left the burrow. Ever. Mama made sure to bring everything her baby needed straight back to their home, utilizing those frequent market trips that Mabel's never been allowed to go on. Plenty of water. Food, which was usually some variation of that mysterious mush (that took a long time for her to learn how to choke down regularly) in a wooden bowl—enough of it to keep her alive and healthy, but never what felt like enough to give her shrunken belly that nice n' warm, full feeling. An old flannel blanket to keep her warm in her moss bed. Every now and then, a new plain, burlap dress that Mama insists Mabel wear every single day, the new ones always exactly like the old. Cold water in a basin for an occasional bath.

She would bring human things, too, ever since the time the Mayor had dropped by for that first of many visits. Smooth still insisted on calling them 'gifts.' Who knows how the mole woman kept acquiring these items, but they just kept appearing. Toothpaste. An occasional change of undergarments. Sometimes, soap. Mostly just random things that always seemed to run out very, very quickly, like stale crackers, or cough drops, or a box of chalk. She's starting to think that all this stuff comes from the market as well, and Mama just doesn't like to buy it as often... Maybe it's expensive?

What Mama brings Mabel the most frequently, however, isn't for Mabel at all—it's fabric. All kinds and types and sizes and patterns of dingy old used fabric. Stripes, polka dots, floral print, fleece, cotton, wool. Mama picks up and brings back whatever she can get her paws on, it seems. Apparently clothes and fashion aren't really high on most mole peoples' priority lists; Mama on the other hand loves that stuff, and she still wears that old striped pink sweater around her neck on the regular, much to her young ward's secret chagrin.

Mabel can remember the day that a stitch in the pink sweater Mama took from her had snagged on something, and the mole woman had seemed to randomly remember her adopted child's talent for knitting and sewing. She had disappeared from the burrow in an instant, staying out for hours. The next



morning Mabel woke up to a sewing kit, pair of knitting needles, and a large bundle of purple yarn in her pile of gifts. At first Mabel thought it all might really be for her, and for a fleeting moment got excited about whipping herself up a quirky sweater to pull over her bushy head, just like she used to—but Mama very quickly made it clear that was not going to be the case. No, ever since that morning, Mabel’s sort of become Mama’s own little personal sweatshop, churning out hats, sweaters, dresses, scarves, you name it, all at Svooth’s request—well, to be honest, they were more like orders than requests. Orders that Mabel has diligently learned are best followed through exactly as Mama wants them. Like, *exactly* as she wants them. Thanks to Mabel, Svooth has become the best dressed mole person in all the burrows, something the woman clearly has come to pride herself on greatly.

Thinking about it, Svooth must have lugged back several tons of important junk to their home since ‘adopting’ Mabel.

Never shoes, though.

Mama didn’t understand the concept of shoes, saying something along the lines of how “there ain’t a lick of use to ‘em.” It didn’t matter. She was kind of right. There was really no need for shoes here in their home of dirt walls and glowing green crystals.

But for some reason, one day—*that* day—Mabel had dragged out her dusty black flats from her little pile of belongings in her room. Maybe she just wanted a reminder of what feet looked like with shoes on.

The young teenage girl had tried to slip her feet right in, one fluid motion, just like she used to... but something wasn’t right. They wouldn’t go on easy. Mabel had been stubborn about it, grumbles trickling from her scratchy throat, stuffing and pushing and yanking with her fingers—because these were *her* shoes, she knew for sure. They were hers, so why the flip shouldn’t they fit?

When she eventually forced them both all the way on, the backs cut into her heels. Her toes squished together painfully. Her dirty skin rose out along the edges, trying to escape. It felt like her little shoes were seconds away from bursting right off her feet, in an oddly heart shattering explosion of worn black leather and two rubber soles.

And finally, *finally*, like a sharp slap to the face, it hit her.

These shoes—the ones she'd worn the last time she saw another human being, the first time she'd encountered Mama—didn't fit anymore. Her feet had grown. *She'd* grown. Judging by how painfully tight her shoes are on her now, she'd grown a lot.

And... she was still down here.

Mabel remembers slouching against the wall, her features scrunched up into a blank sort of bewilderment as she'd thought: This wasn't supposed to happen. This wasn't the plan. She was supposed to have... she was supposed to have... what? Been rescued? Set free? Magically teleported out of here?

Something.

In her head it had always been an inevitability, an unquestionable belief. This situation was many things—crazy, strangely okay in some ways, horrible in many, many others—but not permanent. Never permanent. Rescue, escape, freedom... *Of course*, the back of her mind had always told her, no matter how much despair or loneliness or fear managed to creep into her heart along the way. Of course this isn't permanent. Pfft, duh. Nightmares don't last forever. Gotta wake up eventually, right? *Of course*. It was gonna happen, one way or another.

But it never had.

Her old escape plans had never culminated to anything. At first it was hard to even sneak outside the safety of her Mama and the burrow with shadowy memories of being small in the dirt while a monster hovered over her, ready to devour, attacking her before she even made it to the door. And after those fears faded enough for her to actually build a resolve to venture out while Svooth slept, something had always gotten in the way, or went wrong, or—or Mama had just done or said something extra sweet to her, so she couldn't leave then, it wouldn't be right, so it would get put off to do later. Somewhere along the line her plans had just sort of withered away in their own fruitlessness. Now, they consisted of nothing but a few crudely drawn maps hidden away in a secret hiding place in the wall of her room, gathering dust, forgotten.

There was no way to tell how much time had passed since she'd last felt the sun on her skin. But it was enough for her old shoes, the comfy ones that used to fit her perfectly, to leave tiny welts on her feet. Tears had watered up in her eyes as she'd yanked them off, one at a time, only one thought on her mind.

She wasn't going to be leaving, was she?

That slap of her realization left an angry red mark on her heart for days, as she had tried her hardest to start accepting that no, Mabel, there would be no miraculous rescue. You're going to stay here, as Mama's baby, forever. Whatever had been your life on the surface isn't your life anymore, and that was that, so you should go ahead and start letting it go.

Okay. Right. Great! She'd just do that.

R-right.

For many nights in a row she'd cried herself to sleep, something she hadn't done in ages—and never like that. Deep, shuddering sobs that she had to stifle the best she could, dragging out from her chest so long and sharp that they'd knock her out for hours and hours afterwards. Which was a good thing, because with being awake came the feeling of an invisible elephant sitting on her heart, painfully and ruthlessly crushing it. She spent almost all her time sleeping again. Moving around at all became a chore. Something inside Mabel had changed, thanks to those too-tight shoes.

Eventually Mama stopped putting up with her listlessness. She didn't seem to be as interested in having a child that did nothing but sleep and mope. A new hat needed to be finished, or a skirt, or this or that. 'Sad Zombie Mabel,' as Mabel started thinking of herself, wasn't really physically able to carry out the usual amount of obedience and adoration that her caretaker required—and Mama did not like that one bit. "*Christ child, get up and put on a damn smile already before Mama has ta come over there and smack one on ya!*" Mabel can still hear the cold words echoing in her ears.

So, she did. One day Mabel got up from her bed, wiped the tears from her face, and after that, no more tears came. Her eyes were bone-dry, as were her insides. Empty. Ready as she'd ever be to start over, feeling much more practiced at holding back her brain from thinking thoughts that would make her break down all over again. The knitting needles came to life in her small, dirt-encrusted hands again, and she got right to work on that hat, that patchwork skirt. She was able to smile at her Mama, nice and wide, who patted her head and gushed about what a good baby doll she was in the sweetest of voices.

Mabel isn't sure how long it's been since the shoes, since she stopped crying.

Time doesn't really feel like it matters anymore.

Today, Mabel sits alone against the crystal-lit wall in the den, munching on a few precious pretzels she's dealt out for herself from her 'gift' food. Absentmindedly she runs her fingers along the downy hair that covers her legs, picking off specks of dirt that have gotten stuck here and there. Not to get clean... just for the fun of it, really. The feeling of being totally clean is so foreign to her now that she doesn't really miss it.

Truthfully she's supposed to be working on her sewing, but Svooth's not home at the moment, so she's kinda maybe straying from her task. As tough as the skin on her fingers has become, they still ache from doing this day in and day out. She's decided her weary, calloused fingers have earned a little break.

"Boop. Da doop. Da boop-dee-doop doop." Mabel hums softly, now pouring a bit of water from the basin she used to wash some of Mama's clothes earlier onto the dirt floor, with every intent of making more mud sculptures. It's one of her new hobbies, and good for keeping busy (when her Mama isn't looking of course, because "pretty little girls like her shouldn't be stoopin' to playin' 'round in filth"). She's even managed to make a little doll sort of thing using sticks and mud and leaves, christening it 'Judy'; admittedly Judy resembles more of a slime monster than a human being, but Mabel likes to think her mud-companion has just had one too many botched plastic surgeries.

She pats the ground with her hands, mixing up some good, solid mud. As she does this, Mabel doesn't really think about anything in particular; she likes to think she's perfected the art of keeping her mind nice and blank. She's just started to shape some of the mud into a ball when the sound of rustling approaches the front door of the burrow, sending a bolt of nerves straight to her chest. Quickly her palm smashes her forming mud creation right back into the earth before she scuttles back over to her former seat against the wall, quickly wiping her dirtier-than-usual fingers on the back of her shapeless brown dress. She's in the middle of yanking her sewing back into her lap when the door bursts open to reveal a satisfied-looking Svooth, a full wicker basket hanging from one paw.

Mama skips right over any greetings. "Did ya manage to finish my dress while I was out, babydoll?"

“Not yet, Mama,” Mabel says, taking care to keep her tone even and cheery. Her heart skips a beat when a cold glint flashes through Svooth’s blue eyes, but it’s gone as quick as it came, and she’s able to relax again.

“Ya best finish by tomorrow now, ya hear? Mama needs it for her market trip,” Svooth says sternly, setting her basket down on the rickety kitchen table, untying and removing her Mabel-made headscarf.

Mabel bites her lip, realizing now is her chance to voice a question that’s been niggling away at her for awhile now. She’s heard mention of this market loads of times, seen tons of stuff come back from it, but has never actually been there. That debilitating fear she originally had of other mole people ‘round these parts has kinda been squashed to the side, thanks to her unending stir craziness.

Ugh, if she could just step foot out of this burrow again, just for a little itty bit...

The brunette swallows resolutely, watching Mama dig around in the basket.

*Okay, this is it. Go for it Mabel. Just ask. You got this!*

“Maybe...” her voice comes out as a rasp, and she clears her throat, trying again. “Maybe I could come with you? I mean, to the market, tomorrow? I promise to be—”

“Absolutely not,” is the sharp answer that interrupts, and Mabel nods, averting her eyes, not even considering arguing about it. She sniffs, blocking out the sinking feeling in her belly as she continues to work on the skirt-in-progress, just like she blocks out everything else. It was a stupid question anyway.

Mama clucks in her direction. “Now child, don’t look so disappointed. Today’s a special day for the both of us.”

“It is?” Mabel’s head lifts back up, her eyebrows scrunched in confusion. There’s certainly been nothing special about this day so far. Just the same old, same old...

“Why, of course! It’s ya first birthday with ya Mama!”

Mama’s words aren’t clicking at all. *Birthday?* Mabel hasn’t thought about

birthdays in a long time. And anyways, her mole mother never even bothered to ask when Mabel's birthday was, how could she possibly know—

“Can ya believe it, babydoll? Me n’ you already been together a whole year. Days jus’ fly by, don’t they?”

Svooth keeps gushing, but Mabel doesn’t register any of it. Her sewing hands slowly fall limp in her lap as her eyes glaze over.

*Wait, wait... a year?*

*Has it really been...*

The image of a pair of dusty black flats pops into her brain. And just like that, Mabel knows without a single doubt in her heart that it’s true.

*A year.*

Woah.

This is the first time Mabel has ever had any real, solid sense of time passage. She’s been down here a whole year. Completely forgot about her real birthday. She’s fourteen, now. And in a few months, she’ll be *fifteen*. Weird.

Mabel tries to process all of this information in her head, but she can’t, not really. She just sits there, blankly staring at a random crystal on the wall. She blinks slowly while Mama keeps talking, her mind starting to wander into places it’s not supposed to go anymore.

She’d never had a birthday that was just hers, before. Birthdays were always a shared occasion. Shared parties, sometimes shared gifts, *always* a shared cake. Although every year she always insisted on blowing out her half of the candles exactly 5 minutes before—

Dipper. His name comes slicing through her brain like a razor blade, random Dipper-birthday related memories spurting vividly and violently from the gaping wound left behind. Their sixth birthday party, when their parents had rented a pony that somehow ended up bucking off her wailing twin brother mid-ride, resulting in a b-day hospital trip and Mabel doing her best to crudely draw all of his favorite Monstermon on the cast on his wrist to cheer him up—or in third

grade when he had a conspiracy theory that the lunch ladies were actually aliens trying to poison the student body and was convinced that the birthday cupcakes they'd brought for their class had been tampered with—or how last year they'd had their own personal birthday party together in their old treehouse right before their real party, just the two of them, one that had involved dumb party hats and water guns and silly string and sucking helium out of balloons and she specifically recalls laughing so hard at his high-pitched impression of Blendin Blandin that she'd peed herself a little—

Mabel jolts back to herself, back to where she sits in near darkness far, far underground, her eyes blurring with tears, her hands balling up. No. No no *no!* Stop that! Stop that right now, Mabel. You're supposed to be letting him go, remember? Him, and Mom, and Dad, and everyone else—

The burrow walls feel like they're closing in on her, that cursed elephant rearing its stupid elephant head, ready to sit its gigantic butt right back over her aching heart. A tear rolls down the side of Mabel's face, and she furiously wipes it away, on the verge of living out the shoe incident all over again. This isn't fair, this isn't *fair*, she was doing so well!

“Oh, child, what'n the devil's the matter this time?” Mama's voice crashes through the ringing in her ears. Mabel glances up with watery eyes, unable to respond, waiting for a reprimand for being sad when she's not supposed to be sad anymore.

But to her immense surprise, none comes. Instead she feels herself get lifted up into furry arms, the back of a paw wiping at her wet cheeks. “Now now, no crocodile tears allowed 'n this house today. Not on such a happy occasion.” Mabel, so taken aback and surprised by Mama's extra soft touch, actually feels herself calming a little. Her shoulders stop trembling, and she sniffs.

Svooth smiles gently. “That's better. Look here, Mama got a lil' somethin' for ya.”

Next thing she knows, she's being plopped down at the table and dotingly presented with a small box that comes straight out of the wicker basket. Mabel is only able to sit there, staring, not even sure what sort of emotions she's feeling right now. Today has fired rapid-succession from blah to blue to bizarre.

“Well go on, open it.”

Mabel reflexively does as she's told, lifting away the top to reveal a wooden, beaded necklace. She gasps quietly, looking up at Svooth, who just smiles back. Carefully, her fingers scoop it out of its case, holding it up in the dim, greenish light. It's so pretty... it looks like something that would belong to a forest fairy, or a wood nymph. She smiles at the thought.

"Do ya love it?" Mama asks delightedly.

Mabel nods slowly, her earlier panic somehow pushed into the background as she stares, enraptured by this small trinket. Mama's never given her a gift like this before.

"Give it here, I wanna see how it looks on that pretty neck of yours." The molewoman plucks the necklace from Mabel's hands, while Mabel quickly reaches back to sweep aside her short, recently chopped brown curls. A weight settles on her collarbone and the teenager looks down to marvel at her new gift, as Mama steps back around to behold her, murmuring, "*beautiful.*"

"Happy birthday, darlin'." Svooth says after a minute, beaming. "Here's ta many more."

At 'many more,' Mabel's pulse jumps, her smile wilting, her mouth going a little dry. Those thoughts begin to stir up again, that dreaded elephant peeking its head around the corner at the end of a long hallway, threatening to charge in her direction—and as if they had minds of their own, her pointer finger and thumb suddenly fly up to grasp the largest of the new wooden beads at her throat. Her fingers twist it rapidly, round and round and round, until she's able to squash the bad thoughts back down.

Mama begins to hum a soft, bouncy tune as she pulls a half empty tin of cookies out her wicker basket, placing the sweets next to Mabel at the table. After a kiss to the temple, accompanied by a wet nose grazing Mabel's hairline, Mama's eight legs are skittering towards the record player.

"Now don't lollygag, Babydoll," Mama says firmly, but she's wearing a kind grin. Mabel nods, walking over to collect her sewing materials to finish her task. Old, jazzy music fills their home for the rest of the day.

The sweet taste of a hard chocolate chip cookie lingers in the young girl's mouth as she curls into bed later that night, Mama's hat and skirt finished and



resting pretty on the mole woman's vanity.

As she stares up into the darkness, Mabel's fingers once again twist and fiddle with the largest wooden bead of her necklace. She tries not to think about it. Tries to simply fall asleep, but it's impossible not to dwell on it.

A year.

A whole diddly doggone year of dirt and rock and knitting her fingers raw. This is her life now. No one is coming for her. No one.

Not even Dipper.

She curses herself for thinking his name again as images of her long-lost brother bombard her. Dipper laughing triumphantly at his own quote unquote *genius* plan. Dipper at the kitchen table, lazily eating cereal with dark circles under his eyes as he reads some book. Dipper frowning after she playfully teased him about his cracking voice for the jillionth time. Dipper smiling at her, the very tip of his pink nose barely brushing hers as they lay in bed together during a spooky night where they heard wolves wailing, his arms protecting her as he whispers something comforting.

She has so many memories of him, so so many. But each mental image is slightly blurred. Each memory flickers with a bit of disconnect.

Gosh, was that life even real? Was there ever really a dorky boy out there with stars on his forehead, that could make her feel happy and safe just by curling his fingers around hers? The more she thinks about it, the less plausible it seems.

The affection Mama gives Mabel—as undeniably real as it is constant, though more often bitter than sweet—feels nothing like the warmth she felt from the pine-tree-hat-wearing boy in her hazy memory.

Mabel's fingers tremble slightly before she clutches at her necklace, a shaky breath escaping her quivering lips. She's been so bored... so lonely. Could it be possible that she just... made him up? And that speck of warmth, that tiny speck of warmth in her gut that trickles out and seeps through her bloodstream, that fleeting moment of honeyed love she gets from these ghost like memories of holding his sweaty hand... could it be nothing but a trick of her isolated mind?

“No,” Mabel whispers to herself, her eyes squeezing shut in a vain attempt to stop the tears prickling forth. She defiantly kicks off her blanket, moss and leaves shuffling beneath her. She shakes her head, firmly muttering, “No,” once more as she gets up on her feet. She’s being ridiculous. Her brain is seriously farting around with her right now.

“Dipper is real,” Mabel mumbles, stomping over to the secret hole in her wall. She digs out the various scraps of paper that fill it, all scribbled with different tunnel directions and dead ends. “He’s *real*. And so is Mom and Dad, and Stan, and Soos, and everyone else.”

They’re real and they love her, and she loves them. There’s a reason she spent who knows how many nights venturing out into the many tunnels of the burrows by crystal light, gradually mapping out her way in hopes of finding her way out.

No. No more of this. She’s not going to let them go. She has to get back to them. She’s been down here one year too many, it’s time for her to go home. Her real home.

And home she’s going to go. Tonight.

She lifts the scraps of paper to the light, finding the ones that didn’t lead to dead ends or places she’ll simply end up dead, like at some mole person’s doorstep. Her calloused fingers scrape at the wall above her tiny hiding place, easily clawing out a crystal.

Mabel stands, setting her jaw after taking a steadying breath. She peeks out of the nook of her room, dead silence in the air. Just like many times before, she tiptoes the long way around to the door, avoiding the path past Svooth’s room.

The dry wood door is pushed open just enough for her to squeeze out. Fully dilated brown eyes dart back into the dimly lit room, something inside her strumming an oddly wistful tune on her heartstrings. She ignores it, propping the wood back into place and sprinting down the long cavern until she makes it to the center of a now familiar six-way crossing.

Okay. Now what?

She uncrumples the crudely made maps in her hands. Though she hadn’t

explored all six tunnels, she quickly guesses which one is her best option and darts in that direction. She only runs for a minute or two before she's forced to a stop.

"Oh biscuits," she gags under her breath as the rancid stench of stale piss wafted into her nostrils. Gross! She frantically covers her nose with the back of her hand, almost dropping her guiding light, shaking her head. Choosing this path was a mistake. Mabel doesn't exactly know what goes on under those dusty vests and dresses mole people wear, but her nose is certainly getting the message.

She backtracks away from what she assumes is a sewage dump, back to the six way crossing. Okay. That didn't go well, but... alright. Focus. For Dipper. For everything.

She marks that last tunnel as a no-go on her map, and quickly decides on a new, less noxious route.

She tries not to make too much noise as she scurries down the path of dirt and rock, arm outstretched so her little crystal can shine as far ahead as possible. One foot at a time, one right after the other. On and on until the shadow of a rock spooks her or a distant sound echoes down the cavern. She comes to a dead stand-still at every sound, tentatively looking around and tucking herself into any crevice possible. It goes on this way for a while.

Run and hide. Hide and run. Try not to breathe so gosh darn loud.

Run and hide. Hide and run. Ignore the slight burning in her calves.

Run and hide. Hide and run. Maybe all these little sounds she's hearing are just in her head?

Run. Jog. Walk. Dang, her feet hurt.

Out of breath, she stops and leans on the cavern wall. Above her a large crystal is budding out from the rocks, but instead of green like the ones at home—at the burrow—it is yellow. She smiles weakly up at it, feeling a tiny bit safe under its semi-bright glow. Mabel slides down to the ground, ruffling through her papers. She checks the appropriate map, making little markings where needed before she forces herself back to her feet. She continues onward, slightly

sagged over and at a much slower pace. The tunnel grows wider and wider, with more and more yellow crystals lining the dirt walls.

A sickening crunch echoes into her ears, and Mabel seizes up. A pitiful howl follows, and her heart drops. There's nowhere to hide, and she can't press herself into the wall either with the jagged illuminating stones everywhere. Petrified, she just stands there, completely still and quiet as her eyes glance every which way.

Nothing. Silence.

Mabel allows herself to breath again, tiptoeing further until she can vaguely make out the source of the previous noise. Mole men, three of them, hunched over a large dead animal... a cougar, maybe?

"Took y'all long enough tah lay that puss down," one of them grumbles, voice deep and scratchy with his gruff accent. He licks the blood off his giant paws, a wicked grin snarling his face at the taste. Mabel's own blood runs cold.

"How should we deal it, Kurvt?" one of the other mole men ask, looking hopefully at the one sucking red off his fingers.

"Skin 'em and gut 'em," he replies easily, wiping the rest of the blood on his furry chest. "He's a big on'. We can eat the best meat, and sell the rest without it bein' noticeable."

The other two mole men make delighted sounds, immediately clawing at the large cat's fur, hacking and ripping it off.

Mabel isn't sure which smell is worst: stale pee or fresh blood.

Oh gosh. Her nose wrinkles at the horrid scent, her eyes closing to block the dim view. She can't go any further. Not with them there. Not with the wet squishing noises of them slicing and tearing into flesh and bone piercing her ears. She... she needs to get out of here!

Mabel turns and runs as fast as she can, the space around her growing smaller, darkness closing in until it shrouds her. Which way did she come from? She can't be sure. Oh no—oh gosh—

In a panic, she runs in whatever direction her feet decide to take her. She keeps running, forgetting to extend her arm to get proper light from the stone in her fist. A tiny rock stabs her foot, but Mabel keeps going. She has to keep going until—

She stops.

Her heart pounds rapidly in her chest, now aching at the sight of growing light down the tunnel. She gasps.

That sort of light doesn't come from crystals. That's...

Sunlight.

A sob-like laugh bubbles out of her, a strange warmth tickles her insides. She... she did it? She actually did it! Mabel bursts forward into a sprint, forgetting about the mole men, the slain cat, the pain in her jelly legs and sore feet. Her chapped lips crack harshly into a shaky smile, her rasping laughter shaking her entire body as wide unbelieving eyes stay fixed on the source of quickly growing light—

A faint screeching sound from far ahead of her has Mabel stopping so hard she almost topples over face first into the dirt. She bites down hard on her lower lip, her laughter dying. Her hand leaps up to her neck to fiddle with the bead of her new necklace, the smooth wood rolling easily betwixt her thumb and pointer finger.

She stands frozen, listening for more sounds, but none come. She swallows hard.

She could risk it, just keep going. Maybe the sound just came from a bird or something. She's never made it this far before, and something inside her is telling her that if she doesn't leave this place now, she never will again.

Her eyes glance around the softly lit tunnel, helplessly searching out an answer on what to do. Junk lines the sides of this part of the tunnel, broken bits of glass, shabby old items that were probably deemed worthless by scavengers and left behind. Her gaze seems to gravitate naturally in one direction until it eventually lands on an abandoned red parasol. The ratty lace ripped apart and the handle is now broken, rendering it useless. Mabel's feet step backwards on their

own.

Mama. That's Mama's. Or, it was.

Mabel's heart jumps again as she envisions the image of Svooth, her thoughts turning to darker places. Oh man, Mama is going to be devastated when she finds Mabel's bed empty in a few hours. Devastated, and then furious.

She swallows again, a finger tracing over a healing bruise that decorates her thin wrist. If Mabel has learned anything over the course of the past year, it was that rule number one around here is to never, ever make Mama mad.

Mabel makes a small whining sound, glancing at the darkness behind her before turning back around to face the light. It feels so good to see the light again. *Real* light. Even if it's just a faraway glimpse of it. Her eyes drink it in, glued to that spot at the end of the tunnel, parched from a year in near darkness. But suddenly being here and doing this made her stomach churn. She's so far away from Mama. So far away from her burrow. *This...* this wasn't...

Her brain starts to send up more red flags, worry and fear and doubt slowly snuffing out every bit of her former happiness. Even if there wasn't something down there at the end, waiting to devour her, how would she ever make it out of this hole on her own? It's too steep to climb, she remembers that for a fact. What is she going to do, hop around and scream for help on the off chance there's someone in that empty field to hear her? Someone who *isn't* interested in consuming her flesh? She could be yelling for hours. She doesn't have unlimited time, here. Mama is going to wake up soon, and when she finds her baby gone, she is going to know exactly where to look.

Mama would come for her. Mama would drag her back home. And Mabel's limbs begin to shake at the thought of what would happen once they arrived.

*Don't make Mama mad. Don't make Mama mad. Don't make Mama mad—*

Mabel shakes her head, tears pricking her eyes. She didn't think this through, oh god, she didn't think this through! Her mind quickly descends into a jumbled mess of errant thoughts and fears, popping in and out, making her head spin. Blurry memories of her old life clash with vivid ones of Mama.

Her old life. The light, the surface... it's all right there, up ahead... so close,

right *there*—

It's right there... but... *but*...

Her whole body is trembling now, a tear rolling down her cheek. She can't just leave. Mama would get angry, and she would find her. Mama will always find her, because Mabel will always be Mama's baby. Svooth had repeated it so many times by now that the phrase is burned into her eardrums. Heck, she can practically hear Mama's voice right now, speaking low, right against her ear.

*Don't make ya Mama have to punish you, child.*

*I'm doing this for yer own good.*

*Learn from your mistakes, babydoll.*

*Don't make Mama mad.*

Mumbles and growls suddenly start up ahead, the final straw in coming to a decision that she was headed towards anyway. Mabel takes one last look at the light at the end of the tunnel, all the hope and elation in her chest fading as she comes to a state of sinking acceptance. This isn't going to work. She was stupid to think this was a good idea. She... she needs to go back. She needs to go home to her mama.

Heart pounding, Mabel turns harshly on the balls of her bare feet, scurrying her way back towards the burrow as fast as she can.

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"Babydoll!" Mama calls out cheerfully, awaking Mabel from her slumber. She feels bone tired from last night's escapades. Her body is sore, and her eyelids are heavy. She wants to sleep forever. But when Mama's voice rings out again, Mabel crawls out of her bed.

Mama's bouncing around in the kitchen, wearing her new hat. A bowl of mush and half a bottle of water awaits Mabel at the table. Mabel silently takes her seat, poking at the gook before forcing a spoonful into her mouth.

"Hurry up and eat, now. Yer mama has special plans for us today."

“Plans?” Mabel softly asks, scratching at her cheek. The sweat from all her running had dried with the dirt, and she felt ickier than usual.

Mama wears a brilliant smile, all four of her baby blues sparkling. “I’ve changed my mind. My babydoll shouldn’t be hidden away! You did just have a birthday, after all. I’d say that qualifies ya to have a lil coming out of sorts. Today will be your debut to the burrows!”

Mabel blinks, gazing at her chipper Mama in mild confusion. A debut?

“After today, everyone will know that ya’ll is mine. And I can take ya on trips, and we can go to town hall, and oh! It’s so exciting. Everyone will be so envious of us!”

Mabel feels a tightness in her chest. She clasps her hands, eyes snapping down to the table and then back over to her Mama. Svooth’s face was serious, no glint in her eyes, her smile pointed but genuine. Oh my gosh. No way. No way! Go out? As in, outside the burrow? This place she’d been trapped in for... for... well, almost an entire year! If she didn’t include last night when she’d gotten away... almost gotten away. But... but this wouldn’t be like last night, or any of those other nights she’d crept along the tunnels by crystal light, alone and terrified. Mama would be at her side, protecting her. She’d be able to walk freely—maybe even run, sometimes, if Mama let her—she’d be able to see things, see living things, besides Mama. For the first time in so, so long!

“I-I’d love that!” Mabel says, bouncing in her seat. Her cheeks grow tight and she realizes with a start that she is smiling ear to ear.

Mama raises her arms and Mabel flinches back, recoiling into herself, waiting—but no paws follow through. Mabel opens her eyes and her Mama is still standing there, her arms still outstretched, a smile still on her face. Mabel glances between her Mama’s face and her arms a few more times before slowly moving into them, feeling them clasp around her, tight and warm. She laces her own arms into Svooth’s fur, trying her best to ignore the painful fluttering in her stomach as Mama pulls her closer, the strength of her muscles obvious. She closes her eyes, pushing the yucky feeling away, focusing on Mama. On Mama holding her, on Mama stroking her hair, on how soft Mama’s fur feels today. Mama isn’t all bad. Mama is really nice to her, sometimes. She remembers.

She thinks of Mama tucking her into bed. Mama singing sweetly to her.



Mama dancing. Mama kissing her cheek, and complimenting her beauty. Mama slashing at the Mayor when he tried to play with Mabel's hair. Mama presenting her with that beautiful necklace. Mama whispering "*I love you, babydoll,*" in her sweet southern drawl. "*I'll keep ya safe, I promise.*"

Mabel blinks, still in disbelief. She leans into the embrace, burying her face in Mama's soft fur. Maybe... maybe it won't be so bad, staying Mama's baby.

## Part 9

“—And there it was, givin’ me a stare either like it wanted me for a snack, or wanted to become one of mah’ oldest friends! I might’a taken it up on its offer for the second one but I had to skee-daddle on outta there, on account’a it was throwin’ nuts at me somethin’ fierce!”

Dipper’s right eye twitches as he eyes the old man standing next to him, the grip on the yellow legal pad cradled in the crook of his elbow tightening considerably. “Uh *huh*.” Cautiously, he makes a bit of a ‘hurry up’ gesture with his hand, still attempting politeness. Sort of. “Can we uh, skip to the part where you saw the creature?”

“Oh, right! Well after I ended mah’ affair with the gang of attractive squirrels, I started makin’ my way back home. Took a shortcut through the park, see? Was only in there a few minutes ‘fore I heard somethin’ a rustlin’ at the edge of the woods, there.”

“And?” Dipper raises his eyebrows excitedly, the pen in his hand almost jittering with anticipation. “What did you see?”

“And wouldn’tcha know it, turned out to be mah very own Darlene! I knew that beautiful squirrel couldn’t stay away from all this mesmerizing charm for long! *Heh hehhee!*”

Dipper groans inwardly, dragging a hand down the length of his face. The smell of garbage is making his eyes water and McGucket’s laugh is *really* starting to grate on his ears. It’s getting harder for him to ignore the creeping feelings of doubt he has about standing here in this junkyard, pumping the old man with a bandaid on his beard for information; Dipper loves the guy, he does, it’s just... if he’s honest with himself, he knows that Fiddleford McGucket’s mind hasn’t been aging all that well lately. But unfortunately the people in this town who actually notice the supernatural things happening around them are far and few between, so he’s been forced to work with the resources he has—which apparently means listening to a long winded, overly detailed saga about switching one’s romantic preferences from raccoons to squirrels. Desperate times, desperate measures and all that jazz.

Dipper shakes his head. “Can we maybe forget the squirrels for a second? I just need to know about the—”

“Never, boy, *never!*” And now there’s an over dramatic finger wagging around in Dipper’s face. He finally feels the last of his patience evaporate from his body.

“Dude!” He snaps, then immediately regrets it. “Sorry man, I just—did you actually see this creature or are we just wasting our time here?”

“Well o’ course we’re wastin’ our time! But I did see the thing.”

Dipper breathes out, holding his hands up carefully, afraid McGucket might lose focus again. “Great. Just—hang on to that thought alright? Tryyy and keep it at the surface.” He digs his phone out of his pocket, tapping on the screen with his thumb a couple times before bringing it close to his mouth. “*Hokay.* September 29, 2:30 pm. Day... 27, I think? Yeah. Day 27 on mole people theory. Interviewee is... Fiddleford McGucket.” With a sigh he places his phone down between them on the hood of a rusty truck before poising his pen against the legal pad. “Alrighty then. Describe exactly what you saw on the night of the 25.”

McGucket takes a deep breath, pulling at the straps of his filthy brown overalls. “Well then. Thing came skitterin’ through the trees a few minutes after Darlene. Only caught a glimpse of it, but I bee-lieve it had legs like a spider. And great big claws!”

“Great... big... clawssss.” Dipper mumbles to himself as he scribbles out the words. Some would call it overkill to write everything down even when there’s already a recording; he calls it being prepared. “Uh huh, uh huh, what else?”

“Looked right at me with them beeeady yellow eyes. Four of em—er, maybe even six! Then it made this *eeeeerie* hissin’ sound, I thought I was yesterday’s news! But it jus’ ran past me n’ scampered off behind the clock tower.”

“Hold on a sec.” Dipper jams the pen between his teeth, reaching down into his brown knapsack to pull out a large folded up, carefully hand-drawn map of Gravity Falls. Opening up the paper hastily, he lays it out on the hood of the rusted truck. Circles, arrows, and lines drawn in red pen litter the surface of the obviously well-loved map, massive amounts of chicken-scratch notes scrawled out near certain landmarks and in the margins. Dipper takes the pen from his

mouth, bringing it over to tap the area labeled *Circle Park*, a concentrated look on his face. “Okay, so, you’re saying you saw it around here, right?” He draws a hasty circle around the wooded area at the south side of the park. The old man responds with a dazed nod and a nearly-toothless grin, and Dipper makes a note under the circle. “Do you remember which direction it was heading?”

“Yessiree! Thing skittered off into the woods there, towards Smokey Joe’s.” A wrinkly finger points a little ways south of the newly drawn circle. “Probably headed back to its *horrrrr-ifying* nest! Or it was hankerin’ for some barbeque. Whad’do I know, I’m just a crazy old man!” McGucket laughs again, but it falls on deaf ears because Dipper’s brain is busy whirring, mentally mapping out his next move in terms of the search for these mole... people... things. It’s hard not to put faith into any lead he can get since they’re so hard to come by, but he has to take a mental step back and remind himself he’s dealing with Old Man McGucket, here. These days every piece of information he gets from the guy has to be taken with a grain of salt. No matter. It’s somewhere to start, at least.

“Gotta find that nest,” Dipper mutters to himself in determination, stopping the recording on his phone and folding up the map.

Even though it’s been over a year since Mabel’s disappearance, he still won’t rule out the possibility that she could’ve been living in the care of some sort of magical creature this entire time. Hell, he’s banking on it. He lived with manotaurs for a day that one time. Who says the same can’t be said for Mabel and some other race of supernatural creatures... just... for an extended stay?

And his current magical creature theory? The Gravity Falls “mole people.”

Back when he was in the process of recollecting book 3, he managed to piece together a semi-informative record about them, although now he wished he’d racked his brain harder for more details. All he really had to go on was that they were a primitive type humanoid-mole species that lived underground, and according to the author, there might only be one entrance to their giant nest: “*I’ve discovered a hidden hole that opens up into a gaping chasm, from which they seem to occasionally come up to hunt and gather at night. Possibly hostile. Do not engage these creatures.*”

That last passage he remembers by heart; it had been underlined twice in the book with bright red ink.

It's as good a speculation as any about his sister's whereabouts, so for the past month Dipper has been—for what feels like the hundredth time—combing the forest in sections, jabbing at the ground with a shovel, ever vigilant for that hidden entrance that Mabel could've very possibly stumbled into by accident. He started in the trees surrounding the field where he found her kite, and fanned out from there. He's been diligently recording any suspicious tracks, earthen structures and general anomalies along with all his planned search routes on his map... or more like his current pride and joy. From what he vaguely remembers about the pictures and diagrams drawn into book 3, McGucket's description of the creature actually seems to match up.

This time he's onto something, he can feel it.

Dipper stuffs his phone back into the pocket of his gray hoodie, throwing up the hood over his hat and slinging his fraying backpack over his shoulder. He stoops to take his map in one hand and his shovel plus a grease-stained paper bag in the other.

“Welp, thanks for your help, man, I really appreciate it.” Throwing a two-fingered salute in McGucket's direction, Dipper turns to make his leave from the junkyard, but only takes a few steps before that the old man's grating voice stops him.

“Now wait a second, what'cha got in yer hand there Dipper?”

“Er, what?”

“In that white bag, there.”

“...You mean this half eaten cheeseburger?” He lifts up the greasy paper bag uncertainly. He'd been at the diner earlier with Soos, who lately was always insisting he needed to be eating more, and would only agree to give Dipper a ride into town today if he allowed the handyman to buy him lunch, first.

“Mmm, yessiree. Think that'd make a fine payment in exchange for mah useful life anecdotes, don't you?”

“Oh, uh, sure... knock yourself out.” He tosses the doggie bag towards the old man, who at the last second catches it between his teeth and shakes it around like a dog. Dipper tries not to cringe at the sight, awkwardly waving before he

turns and walks away.

Ducking out from under a few broken boards in the wooden fence that surrounds the junkyard, Dipper heads directly for Circle Park, which is all the way across town. Stopping to talk to McGucket had been sort of out of his way, but it'd been worth it. Definitely worth having an idea of where to start, for once.

As he passes by various shops and businesses, the sensation of eyes on him passes over the 15-year-old more than a few times, warming his skin and causing his own eyes to glue themselves to the cracked sidewalk. He's getting looks again. Probably mostly because he's a hooded teenager carrying a shovel over his shoulder, but then again, the 'Pines boy,' didn't exactly have the greatest reputation around town. After the volunteer search parties had finally tapered out, Dipper hadn't been the biggest fan of the general public of Gravity Falls. And *maybe* he might've made his opinion known here and there... pretty vocally. And sometimes publicly. And maybe people didn't appreciate being guilt tripped by some angry kid... or maybe they just pitied him, and didn't know what to say.

Either way, Dipper was lacking in the local friendly support department these days.

He turns a corner, almost running into a telephone pole on the other side—and he's greeted with Mabel's face, grinning merrily at him from one of the few tattered 'Missing' posters that have managed to stay up all this time. There's a little jolt in his heart, and then Dipper finds himself walking faster, more vigor in his step. When a loud, obnoxious voice reaches his ears from a nearby alley, his step falters.

"Heyyy, check it out. Our very own resident lunatic decided to make another appearance!"

Dipper's heart drops. *Great. Just dandy. Don't look over at them, just... just keep walking.*

But his efforts to pretend he's alone are futile, and soon three considerably larger presences are falling into step with him, effectively surrounding Dipper as they all walk along the sidewalk.

"What's with the shovel, Pines? Headed out to do some dirty work?" Trent's

stupid voice invades his eardrums again, this time from right at his side, and Dipper curses his shitty luck.

Ugh. Trent Houghton. Why, *why* did it have to be Trent Houghton?

Trent was only a couple of years older than him, but contrary to Dipper's own semi-noodly stature, this kid was built like a mastodon. Made Robbie Valentino look like an angel. And, for some unknown reason, bullied Dipper relentlessly in the one semester he'd actually been enrolled at the public middle school in Gravity Falls last year; just another reason to add to the many of why he'd dropped out, and convinced his parents to sign him up for an online school instead.

Dipper's rocky relationship with this testosterone-fueled asshole was stretched even thinner when he'd busted Trent and a few of his friends for shoplifting last spring while working the gift shop at the Shack. In hindsight, that was probably stupid of him. Ever since then Trent has been targeting him specifically for harassment, pranks and the like, leaving Dipper only with the option of doing his best to avoid running into him and his little crew. He's usually pretty good at it. Clearly not good enough, though.

"Saw ya checkin' out your boyfriend McGucket over there," Trent says airily. "And here I thought you had no friends. How's that relationship working out for you?"

"Ha. Ha. You done yet? Kinda busy here, guys." Dipper keeps his eyes firmly on the ground ahead. They've almost made it to the edge of the park, now he just needs to figure out a way to shake them off his trail somehow.

"Nope," another one of the boys—he can't remember the guy's name—sniggers. "It just warms my heart, seeing the two craziest shits in town finding solace in each other... y'know, obvious pedophilia aside, how's that old man dick been treatin' ya?"

The other two burst out laughing while Dipper's teeth clench inside his mouth, all sorts of colorful retorts bubbling up in his throat. He can't help but at least spit out a simple "Screw off," before attempting to fast-walk away, only to have a hand on his backpack yank him backwards. His hood falls off as gruff hands spin him back around to face three pretty pissed-looking bigger, older teenagers.

Crap. That was stupid.

“You wanna repeat that, kid?” The larger boy sneers down at him, and—ugh, *curse* his lack of height, or muscles, or intimidation factor, or anything that might actually come in handy right now! Dipper just stands there, unresponsive, his pulse quickening up as the shovel gets knocked out of his hands. He swallows hard, eyes shifting quickly between the three boys.

He notices Trent eyeing his fist, but as soon as he realizes he’s still clutching his map, it’s being wrenched out of his hand. *Oh no. Fuck no. Too far.* Dipper springs forward only to be shoved down to the cement, landing hard on his butt. From down on the sidewalk he’s forced to watch as Trent roughly unfolds all his hard work from the past month, scanning it quickly and barking out a laugh. “Oh, you gotta be fucking kidding me.”

Dipper’s heart leaps and he lunges to his feet again, grabbing desperately for the large piece of paper that’s being held just out of his reach as the other two boys’ hands continue to jostle him away. At this point he knows there’s nothing he can say to get it back that won’t sound like he’s begging, so he keeps his trembling mouth shut.

“Look at this shit,” Trent turns the map to show his friends and they raise their eyebrows, condescending smirks on their faces. Admittedly the scribbles written and drawn all over it probably look like gibberish to anyone but Dipper, but so what? It’s none of their business!

Trent raises an eyebrow at the struggling teenager in front of him, one eyebrow raising. “You’re really still on this? Wow, you’re really still on this. In-fuckin-credible.” His voice trails off into laughter, and Dipper can feel his face heating up.

One of the nameless boys claps a hand on Dipper’s back, heaving a sarcastic sigh. “Aw, kid. When’re ya gonna give it up and pack it in? It’s been like a year, your cousin or whatever ain’t comin’ back.”

Dipper shoulders the mocking hand off his back with a vehement jerk, glaring daggers at a few pebbles near his feet. His jaw twitches, blood pounds in his ears. “*Shut up.*”

“Ohoho!” A toothy grin appears on Trent’s face as he swivels his head



around to look at his friends' equally amused faces. "Looks like you hit a sore spot dude! What d'you think?" Dipper says nothing, which just prompts the guy to continue his tirade. "Hey Pines, ever consider the possibility that she ran away so she wouldn't have to see your ugly-ass face anymore?"

It almost feels like something happening in slow motion, watching Trent tear and crumble the map into a ball within his meaty palms, then leisurely toss it forward, smirking. It bounces off Dipper's head, falling at their feet. A muddy, oversized sneaker follows it, crushing it into a dirty crack in the sidewalk.

And Dipper sees nothing but red.

In a flash hands quivering with rage retrieve the shovel from the ground in a white-knuckled grip; an angry cry erupts out of the furious teenager's chest, air whistling around the metal tip of the shovel as it swings around to make perfect contact with the side of Trent's thick skull, a resounding *clang* echoing through the street.

The older boy crumples to the ground like a rag doll, and Dipper immediately lets the shovel fall from his hands, shaking all over. As he slowly comes back to himself he can see the other two boys gawking at him with wide, stunned eyes, unsettled mutters of "*what the fuck...?*" breaking through the ringing in his ears.

Shit. Oh shit.

Dipper's heartbeat kick into overdrive and he takes a step back, his breathing quickly becoming labored. A glance down to the sidewalk gives him a horrifying eyeful of where Trent lays unmoving, a tiny trickle of blood dribbling down the side of his slackened face, and—oh god, he's going to be sick.

His body screams for him to flee, so he does, doing a sharp 180 on the balls of his sneakers and pounding away in the other direction, the alarm bells in his head screeching at full volume. Dipper doesn't get very far at all before he's being shoved to the ground again, this time falling on his hands and knees, concrete ripping through his jeans and scraping away the skin underneath. Another burst of panic streaks through him, and Dipper makes one last frantic attempt to get to his feet again, but two pairs of hands are seizing his arms, flipping him over and throwing him down so he lands hard on his back. Suddenly Trent's friend is on top of him while the other holds him down, and a

sharp pain explodes under his right eye, then on his left cheek, he can hear a few bystanders yelling and then—wait, is that a police siren?

Everything after that moment is kind of one big delirious blur. Blubs and Durland manage to wrestle the boys off of him, leaving Dipper breathing heavily on the sidewalk in a teary-eyed daze. There's a lot of finger pointing and shouting, some yells of, "That fucking psycho hit our friend with a shovel and then tried to run away!"—then he's being hauled to his feet, and led into the back of a cop car?

Man, this really isn't how he imagined his day playing out when he woke up this morning.

Hours later, Dipper finds himself still sitting in a chair at the police station, the bag of ice he was given to hold to his face now completely melted. His eye and his cheek and knees and hands and just what feels like his entire body are all thrumming with pain, the feeling of needing to throw up yet to subside.

Today scared him. Today is *still* scaring him.

Trent had only been temporarily knocked out, out for no more than half a minute, luckily with no signs of a concussion afterwards. The little bit of blood he'd seen was only due to a raised piece of rust on the flat bottom of the shovel that had nicked Trent on impact. But god, what if it'd been worse? Who knew he was capable of getting angry enough to... to slam shovels into peoples' heads? Seriously, what the hell? And what's worse—the acid in Dipper's gut churns—Trent's mother wants to press charges. She'd been in here earlier to pick up her son, all but yelling for Dipper's head on a platter, practically giving the pitifully bruised-up teenager a heart attack.

Dipper sniffs, lightly touching his stinging cheek again before pulling the brim of his dingy pine tree hat far, far down over his eyes. Geez. Barely fifteen, and he's getting charged with assault. Well, fourth degree assault. It's probably not too terribly serious in itself—god, hopefully, since he's just a kid with no priors—but this'll certainly put a damper on things with the parentals.

After another half hour of sitting huddled in a plastic chair and pretending he's anywhere else, his Grunkle in shining armor finally decides to show up. A humiliated Dipper peeks out from underneath his hat, watching Stan talk to the cop manning the front desk for a few minutes, and soon a stern hand is

beckoning him over.

“You. Get in the car. We’re outta here.”

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The inside of the old red ‘65 Diablo is quiet on the drive home, the only sounds being the occasional sputters and chokes of the engine. Stan grips the wheel with both hands, keeping his eyes focused on the road for once. Meanwhile the boy next to him keeps his hood up and the side of his forehead pressed against the passenger side window in an attempt to hide his blotchy, swollen face from his great uncle’s view, willing with all his might for his stupid shoulders to stop shaking already. He’s freaking livid at how unfairly this day has played out. But trumping the anger is the fear, pumping through his veins like acid, eating him up inside, his heart thumping painfully as he dreads what’s coming next.

Dipper is already on thin ice with his parents. By this point it feels like they’re just waiting for him to screw up somehow, biding their time until he finally gives them that perfect excuse to haul him back home to California where he belongs. And now, there’s probably going to be fresh assault charge marring his squeaky-clean record, because apparently he’s the type of person who just whacks people in the head with metal shovels. Maybe those guys were right to call him a lunatic.

A miserable shudder rocks through Dipper’s hunched body. Either way, getting to stay here... his search plans... it’s all over for sure.

At last Stan breaks the stifling silence, his shoulders shifting awkwardly. “Listen, Dipper. Uh...”

Oh no. Here it comes. God. Is he supposed to just sit here and wait for everything to come shattering down around him?

Dipper whirls around in his seat to train a desperate look on the old man next to him, his hood falling away to reveal two nasty bruises and watery red eyes.

“Please don’t tell Mom and Dad,” Dipper’s voice comes out pathetically thick. “Please, please—” His breath hitches hard and he’s forced to stop, bowing his head to train his rapidly blinking eyes on his clenched hands, tears dripping steadily down his pink nose. A wrinkled hand reaches out to grip his shoulder,

gently shaking him from side to side.

“Alright, alright, c’mon, kid. You’re ok. Just try and calm down.”

Dipper swipes at his wet cheeks, snorting in snot and shaking his head, his lower lip trembling. “T-they’ll move me back, we b—we both know they will.” *And it won’t be home. Not without Mabel.*

A sigh escapes the elder Pines, and he retrieves his hand, a heavy silence falling over the two.

“Look,” Stan says after awhile. “I know how that brain in that big head of yours works. You wouldn’t’ve done it if that little jerkoff hadn’t done something to deserve it. Not saying what you did was okay, but, ah.”

Dipper’s glassy eyes widen at where this seems to be going. Stan hunches forward slightly over the wheel, continuing. “We’ll uh, we’ll figure something out. S’gonna be fine, you’re not going anywhere.”

Dipper blinks. *It can’t be that easy.* Confusion is written all over his face as he turns to stare at his great uncle, who’s already looking back at him, sincerity in his eyes.

“You’re a good kid, Dipper. You’re a solid guy. Don’t you forget it, alright? You got that?”

Dipper’s brows raise in surprise, his chest filling with that hard-to-name emotion that could only be induced by equal-parts gruff and kind Stan words. “Yeah,” he mumbles, voice croaky and soft. The corners of his mouth turn up into a tiny, yet eternally grateful smile. “Thanks, Grunkle Stan.”

Extended sentimental moments aren’t really Stan’s specialty, so after a few seconds his cataract-filled eyes are back on the road. A minute later the car pulls to a stop, the late afternoon shadow of the Mystery Shack looming over them. “Now let’s get you cleaned up,” he says gruffly. “You look like hell.”

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After Soos has thoroughly painted antiseptic on his cuts and bandaged up his scraped knees and hands, Dipper hobbles up the stairs to his attic bedroom, hunched and exhausted. Avoiding eye contact with the right side of the room, he

shuffles over to his desk, eyeing the mess of papers on top of it—they're all pictures and clippings and articles, myths and interviews and possible sightings of the fabled 'mole people'.

Dipper stares off into space, picturing the map he's slaved over for weeks, crushed and ripped and trampled into the mud; he pictures Trent laughing in his face as it's crumbled up in the blink of an eye.

Slowly, carefully, he begins to clear off his desk, stuffing the contents into a drawer that's bursting with dead end speculations and failed plans.

He's just... he's not up for starting all over. He's tired, and hurting, and besides, it's not like he had made any notable breakthroughs with this mole people angle. It was probably time for a new theory anyway.

Dipper lightly kicks the drawer shut with a dirty sneaker and moves towards his sunken mattress, a pained grunt leaving him as he gingerly lays himself down on it. He closes his eyes, having no plans to leave his bed for a long, long time.

## Part 10

The bell on the door jingles merrily as Dipper shoulders his way through it, hands stuffed deeply into the pockets of his puffy winter coat, the smell of burnt pancakes managing to break through the congestion in his nose. Even as the heat radiating from the semi-bustling diner starts to bring feeling back into his frozen cheeks, Dipper still finds himself shivering. If there's one thing he truly misses about living in California (besides the obvious stuff), this was it—winters in Gravity Falls are a *little* too wet and cold for his tastes.

Swiping off his knit hat to shake away the fresh coat of snow sticking to the orange fabric, his eyes peel over the booths against the window. As usual strings of colorful Christmas lights along with a few sprigs of holly here and there still decorate the walls and ceiling; Lazy Susan never seems to realize the holidays are over until around St. Patrick's Day.

It doesn't take long at all for Dipper to spot a mass of fiery red hair in the corner booth. Her back faces him, shoulders bopping faintly to a tune he can't hear, signature bomber hat snug in its rightful place on top of her head.

He doesn't hesitate to make his way over and nudge her shoulder, grinning ear to ear. "What up, Wenderp?"

At his sudden appearance Wendy smiles, green eyes looking him up and down as she removes her ear buds. "Aw, Dip. Skinny jeans? Say it ain't so, man."

"Hey, hey. Lay off, they were a Christmas present from my Mom. I wear the crap she buys for me, that is the nature of my wardrobe, take it or leave it." He rolls his eyes, sliding into the plastic seat across from her. "Plus they don't look that bad on me, so, yeah. Take that. Bam." He leans back teasingly in the booth, crossing his arms behind his head.

"Oh, wow, ok," Wendy shoots back, laughing. "So you can give me shit about wearing glasses with no lenses in them but I'm not allowed to say anything when you join the noble ranks of leg suffocaters. You damn dirty hipster hypocrite."

Dipper shrugs at her from across the table, exposing all his teeth in a guilty smile and shedding his gloves along with his coat. All he's really thinking at the moment is how glad he is to be back in town, and how much he missed the comforting feeling that banter with Wendy always manages to bring him, so yeah, he'll happily accept his fate as a 'dirty hipster hypocrite.'

Lazy Susan comes by their table and Dipper looks exclusively at her good eye as he delivers his order of a Coke and chicken strips with extra honey mustard, while Wendy just orders another coffee. Susan distractedly tries to sway Wendy, but the redhead shakes her head and Lazy Susan bumbles off in the midst of Wendy's explanation: "My dad's been practically force-feeding my brothers and I leftover holiday venison, trust me, I'm good."

The pair of friends then proceed to make exaggerated winking gestures at each other along with a few friendly impressions of the elderly waitress, stopping abruptly with innocent grins adorning their faces when she comes back with their drinks.

"So hey," Dipper says once Lazy Susan leaves again, ripping open the paper on the straw with his teeth before letting it plop in his drink. "Thanks again for filling in as pig babysitter for the last two weeks. Seriously, you're a lifesaver."

"Nah, it was really no big deal." She waves him off, busily spooning hoards of sugar in her coffee. "Waddles is a solid house guest, we never had any issues. Aside from my little brother plotting to make him into bacon... just the one time though. I still don't get why your parents have such a problem with him."

"Um, my mom still hasn't forgiven him for what he did to her carpet the one time I brought him with me."

"Ah," she nods knowingly. There's a pause while she glances sideways out the window, a thoughtful look on her face, soon catching his eye again with a smirk. "Man it had to have been weird having Stan come home with you this year..."

Dipper rolls his eyes, letting out a short laugh. "*Lil'* bit, yeah... although it was pretty funny to see him out of his comfort zone. You should've seen him trying to flirt with my other Grandma." His body quakes in an over-exaggerated shudder. "Hilarious, yet... scarring."

“Sh’yeah, I’ll bet.” She shakes her head jokingly as she lifts up her mug to take a quick sip. “So. Aside from the Stan weirdness, how was your Christmas?”

The question was inevitable but it still catches him off guard, and Dipper can’t stop himself from stiffening in his seat. “Oh, uh... I got a new PSP? Besides that, just, the usual, I guess. You know. Holidays are always hard, n’ stuff... yeah.”

He trails off, fastening his gaze on a random spot in the air a little ways from the napkin dispenser. Luckily there’s no fear of having to elaborate that ‘the usual’ includes frequently overhearing his mom sniffing behind a locked bedroom door... unlimited amounts of rock hard, thinly-veiled condolence fruitcakes that obscure neighbors and relatives *still* insist on giving his family... a bunch of old Christmas traditions that now just feel forced and empty without Mabel. Because he knows for certain Wendy won’t ask, or pry. It’s become one of the things he likes most about her.

Sure enough, the older girl is swiftly, yet composedly changing the subject to the epic story of how her own family had to go through 3 different Christmas trees this year, effectively taking the conversational spotlight off of him. If she caught on to the full extent of his avoidant reaction (which he’s 90% sure that she did, since she knows how he works pretty well at this point), she isn’t showing it, only filling Dipper with more appreciation for her.

Their food comes, Wendy continues to tell him funny stories about her family’s odd holiday shenanigans, and he feels himself relaxing again. Their conversation stays casual, ranging in topics from Dipper’s relatively new job at the local movie theater, to the pathetically hilarious groveling attempts by Wendy’s latest ex, to whether or not the head of a guy sitting a few booths down looks like a potato. Certain subjects are naturally avoided by both teens, so the atmosphere between them stays lighthearted, full of smiles and jest and food flicking.

Eventually he becomes content with letting Wendy steal his fries, and just listening to her talk while he makes the occasional comment and nod of assent. The last few weeks of mandatory family time have left him stressed and more than the typical amount of down and out. So it’s nice, unwinding in this plush seat at the warm, familiar diner, simply hearing her voice.



He's missed her. Being one of the select few people who can (sometimes) temporarily distract him from the things that plague his mind to obsessive levels, Dipper has really come to treasure Wendy's friendship. To be honest, he relies on it. Heavily. He needs her laid-back attitude and easy, unquestionable support... because in the moment, it can make him feel like everything's going to be okay. And it makes him feel better than any anxiety pill prescribed by his annoying know-it-all psychiatrist, that's for sure.

An hour, three cups of coffee and a piece of chocolate pie later, Wendy suggests the two of them take a walk around town. Despite the cold and the near foot of snow on the ground, the idea sounds appealing to him, and Dipper agrees with a grin. They stand to pull back on their copious amounts of winter gear, and when the redhead attempts to raid her coat pockets for cash to pay for her coffee, he touches her arm, stopping her.

"Nooo need Wen, cheap coffee's on me today."

She rolls her eyes at him, smiling nonetheless. "Psh, it's cool man, save your money."

"Hey, new crappy job remember? Dipper's rollin' in that fine minimum wage dough." Before she can protest again he pulls two crumpled 5-dollar bills out of his wallet and tosses them on the table. "Besides, I owe you for Waddle-sitting."

Since the money's already out, Wendy seems to relent, but not without a, "Thanks nerd," and a friendly noogie first. She's still got a solid few inches on him so it's really no trouble at all for her to steal the hat off his head and dig her fist into the messy brown mop underneath it. He bats her hand away, snatching his hat back with a laugh.

Fresh snow has just begun to flutter down again when they exit the diner, and a comfortable silence falls over the pair as they hike around town side by side, maintaining a more than leisurely pace. Right now Dipper is in no hurry to get back to the Shack, where chores, unpacking and the old lady boring movie channel inevitably await him; he's enjoying the company, and there's something oddly soothing about the quiet, boundless winter wasteland that's currently the town of Gravity Falls.

Soon they find themselves trudging through the town square. Movement reaches his peripherals and Dipper turns his head to see two kids, a boy and a

girl who both look about 9 or 10, giggling and tossing snow at each other across the street.

His feet seem to freeze in place and he finds himself staring at the sight as if hypnotized, the easy smile on his face melting away. Wendy, a pace or two ahead of him, doesn't notice him stop and continues on alone. He doesn't call out to her.

There's a vague thought in his head that he's probably acting like sort of a creep, but it doesn't register enough for him to force himself to keep walking. Instead he lets his eyes linger on their brown hair and smiling faces and the hot pink color of the nameless girl's puffy jacket, their carefree laughter reverberating hollowly through his eardrums... the calm sense of relaxation he's been feeling seems to evaporate, a stifling sensation coming to fill his chest to the brim. Such a familiar feeling, but painful as it ever was.

Wait. Is he really jealous of a couple of random kids right now?

Oh god. He is. Because it's unfair, so *unfair*. He's not even sure *what's* unfair about all this exactly, but the word won't stop repeating in his head. Suddenly the mundane distractions he's been holding onto today drift away from him like steam escaping into the air—his new job, the guy with a head shaped like a potato, stupid *chocolate fucking pie*—all he's thinking about now is how horrible the last few weeks have been without her, how empty the last few *years* have been without her. And—didn't she used to have a pink jacket just like that one?

What is he even doing here, walking around aimlessly in the snow? He should be out looking for Mabel! What is the matter with him?

A hand comes to rest on his shoulder; Wendy must have finally noticed he wasn't with her anymore, and backtracked. Dipper doesn't react, just keeps standing there, forlornly staring across the street. The kids finally run out of sight together, unaware that anyone was ever watching them.

He blinks hard, wiping his nose on his coat sleeve and letting out a breath he didn't realize he'd been holding. The snow has started to come down harder, making it almost impossible to see across the square anymore.

"Come on, Dip," Wendy says finally, curling an arm around his sagging shoulders. He digs his hands into his pockets, allowing her to lead him away in

the other direction.

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They walk until they reach a bench at the edge of the park. Wendy brushes most of the snow off with one dirty boot and proceeds to slump down on it, and Dipper robotically follows suit. Cold moisture seeps into the fabric of his pants when his bottom hits the frozen wood. He shifts uncomfortably in his seat before breathing in and letting out a slow, miserable exhale. Wendy's arm come around him again, lightly pressing his head into her shoulder; he takes her cue and lets his head rest on her wool jacket.

For a few minutes they stay silent, just watching the dainty white flakes tumble around them and catch on their clothes.

"Missing her a lot right now, huh?" Wendy's voice breaks through the hushed air as she moves her hand to give his shoulders a squeeze. It's a completely obvious question, but at same time, direct. Wendy has never been afraid to broach the Mabel subject with him, at least when she feels it's necessary.

Slowly lifting his head off of her, he grunts out an evasive noise. "The holidays felt tougher than usual this year," comes his light mumble.

Wendy nods understandingly, pausing a moment before replying. "I'm with ya. First few without my mom... really sucked. But hey, it gets like a smidgeon less sucky every year, so."

Dipper says nothing, caught slightly off guard, feeling a little like a self-centered jerk. Sometimes he forgets he and Wendy are in the same boat when it comes to losing loved ones. The only difference is he's still hoping and praying and working hard to make sure his loss is only temporary. While Wendy... well, she didn't really have a choice in the matter.

He feels his shoulders being hugged again. "Need to vent it out, dude? My ears are ready."

For a second or two, Dipper actually considers a good long vent. Considers telling Wendy about how he couldn't take it anymore and gave up decorating their tree halfway through because the vast majority of the ornaments they have packed away are handcrafted by Mabel; about how all his relatives act so

fucking *carefully* around him, treating him like this poor, fragile kid who's clearly lost his twin for good, and how *furious* that makes him. Or about how he and his parents got in a fight because he refused to go to that stupid annual candlelight vigil the community holds for Mabel, the one that feels more and more like a goddamn funeral every year.

He loves his family, he does. But mother of god, the bus to take him and Stan back up to Gravity Falls could not have come any sooner.

Where he used to look forward to holidays, now he just waits for them to be over. They're just another thing for him to get through, like a cold. Or an exam. Or what sometimes feels like every day of his life.

Tilting his head up to take in the gray expanse above, Dipper finally responds. "Nah... think I'd rather just forget about it."

"Gotcha." Wendy takes her arm back to adjust the zipper on her coat, and then pokes the side of his face with her mitten in an attempt to change the subject again. "Geez man. When's the last time you shaved your peach fuzz?"

Reflexively one of Dipper's hands flies up to his face, self-consciously feeling along his chin; the whole face-shaving thing was still a relatively new development. "Why? Does it look bad?" He stops abruptly, his cheeks turning pink as he clears his throat, his voice deepening, "And I think you meant to say manly facial hair, not peach fuzz."

Wendy just grins. "You know, you actually work the scruffy look pretty well. You're probably gonna rock a goatee one day."

The short fifteen-year-old beside her turns to stare dramatically into the distance, raising a stoic fist in the air. "*One day...*"

The two of them dissolve into light giggles, but they die off quickly, and soon Dipper's features are fading right back into that faraway expression he can't seem to shake, and Wendy's face falls a little. She crosses her arms, slumping into a more comfortable position on the bench with a pensive look. After it's been quiet for a minute she nudges his side gently with her elbow.

"Yo. Dips."

“...Sup.”

When she doesn't respond right away Dipper turns to look at her, only to find her staring at him with an uncharacteristically serious expression. Her forest green eyes shift to the side before locking with his brown ones again. “Just some friendly advice from a concerned amiga. But in all seriousness... you gotta let yourself be happy every now and then, dude. Or you're gonna end up losing it.”

Dipper's eyebrows rise up on his forehead, disappearing under his hat, before he drops his eyes. “Yeah... I know,” he mumbles wearily. Once again, he thinks with a long sigh, Wendy is living up to her reputation of not beating around the bush.

He groans out a soft noise of frustration, letting his head drop against the back of the bench so he's looking up into a sea of gray. Snowflakes gather in his eyelashes and on his cheeks, his heart feeling like a weight in his chest. “It's like I've forgotten how to actually relax,” he continues carefully. “Every time I try... eventually I'll see or hear or even *smell* something that reminds me of her and I just—I feel like I need to be *doing* something about it, y'know?”

Wendy smiles sadly. “You're one dedicated kid, Dip.”

The corner of his mouth quirks upward, the half smile nowhere near meeting his eyes, and he shrugs. “I don't know how else I'm supposed to be acting. I mean, she's my sister. I love her.”

There's such a sincere, trembling edge to his voice that even Dipper himself isn't sure what he's trying to say here. Flustered, he scrubs his gloved hand over his mouth, looking away. His voice threatens to crack as he quietly adds, “...I'm not... I'm not gonna give up on her.”

Only the sound of the wind rustling the trees breaks the stillness in the air, as neither one of them says anything for awhile.

When Dipper shifts his eyes back over to Wendy, he's surprised to find her staring at him again. There's still that sad look in her eyes, but her mouth is puckered to the side as if she's deep in thought about something. He's about to ask her what she's thinking but doesn't get the chance because next thing he knows, she's leaning in towards him—and lightly pressing her lips to his.

*Woah, what?*

The gears in Dipper's brain whirl in confusion, trying to decipher what this means, trying to figure out if he's actually feeling anything besides the actual physical sensation of the warm lips against his and the cool hand resting on his cheek... she must've taken off her mitten.

Funny. When he was twelve, kissing Wendy was practically all he thought about, and now he can't seem to insert himself into the moment.

Wendy doesn't seem intent on waiting around long enough for him to stop his mental flailing and respond to her, and soon pulls away, pursing her lips into an easy smile.

"Wh... what was that for?" Dipper hears himself ask in a distant tone, clearing his throat. His face is bright red, only a small percentage being due to the fact that there's a bitter wind chilling their skin and rustling their hair.

She shrugs. "Dunno. Just seemed like you needed it, I guess?"

"Oh." He licks his lips, unsure of what to say. If she did it to take his mind off of Mabel, it wasn't working very well. It was actually doing kind of the opposite.

Rubbing the back of his neck, he stares awkwardly down at his knees. "Wendy, I... get what you're trying to do... I guess? But—"

"Hey man, don't sweat it. I feel ya." She punches him lightly in the shoulder, grinning in her signature chill, 'it's all good' way. He smiles back gratefully. The feeling of awkwardness that might've been creeping up on him before begins to drain from his body, relief quickly taking its place. Honestly, he's not even sure he could've put what he was feeling into words, anyway. At least, words that made sense.

"Haha. Yeah." Dipper looks ruefully up into her eyes, absentmindedly rubbing his palms together to keep warm. "So, we're cool?"

At this Wendy simply scoffs, waving a hand at him and leaning back into the bench. "You're kidding right? 'Course we are dude. Always."

“Phew. Good.” Dipper jokingly pretends to wipe sweat off his brow. “Without you around I’d probably go completely nuts.”

She laughs. “And this is coming from our very own resident loose cannon.”

“What can I say, I’ve embraced the role. Gotta train up hard if I’m gonna take over for McGucket one day.” Dipper cracks his knuckles before he spreads his fingers and splays his hands out in front of him. “‘Old Man Pines,’ misunderstood town loon. S’catchy, right?”

“Totally.” She pulls his knit hat down over his eyes, laughing, and when he pushes the hat back up again she’s pulling a pack of cigarettes and a lighter out of her coat pocket. She sees him staring at her and smiles, rolling her eyes. “I know, right? Still with this bullshit. You mind?”

He hastily shakes his head, raising his hands in surrender. “No complaints here.”

She grins at him and sticks a cigarette between her lips and lights the end of it, her voice sort of muffled as she continues to talk. “I really need to punch the guys for ever getting me into this crap. Although, y’know. Can’t say it was completely their fault.” Smoke wafts out of her mouth and disperses into the bleak winter air. Dipper watches her, biting into his chapped lower lip, all the pre-programmed anti-smoking rhetoric he’d received over the years suddenly feeling irrelevant. He nudges her with his elbow, chuckling nervously and scratching the side of his face when she turns to look at him with questioning eyes.

“Yooo... would it be okay if I uh...?” He motions towards his lips with two tentative fingers.

“What, you want a drag? Be my guest, what’s mine is yours, Dip.” She plucks it out of her mouth and holds it out to him. “God knows you could use one. Just don’t tell Stan. Although pff, knowing him he’d probably end up being chill about it.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Corduroy. Just conducting a small personal experiment. For uh, you know. Science.”

He brings the cigarette to his lips, cautiously giving it an experimental puff.

He's not prepared for the smoke to fill up his mouth so quickly and has to fight off the urge to cough. His eyes water and his throat and nose burn as he exhales, letting it drift out of his nostrils. God, that tasted horrible... why was he doing this again? He doesn't even know what his logic was. Ugh. Better just hand it back.

But for some reason Dipper finds himself lifting it to his mouth again to take another, longer drag, closing his eyes, his brows furrowing together. This time he's unable to hold it in, and his chest spasms with a few hacking coughs as he hurriedly passes the cigarette back to Wendy, his ears heating up when she chuckles.

"Not for you, huh?"

His lips smack together a few times. "Tastes kinda like... tar. With a side of Grunkle Stan's armpit." He pauses, grimacing and hastily adding, "Not that I would know what Stan's pits would taste like, that was a joke, I was joking."

She nods understandingly, laughing. "Probably better for you to find a different way to take the edge off, anyway."

He blinks, feeling himself blush. That wasn't why he wanted to try it, was it? Well, maybe... okay, probably. He shifts awkwardly in his seat, feeling stupid, and almost as if she's able to read all the self-detrimental things going on in his mind, Wendy nudges his shoulder. "Hey, don't worry about it. Trust me, smoking's for chumps."

Dipper watches in mild amusement as she immediately follows her halfhearted anti-smoking pep talk by taking another drag. "Right," he says with a wry smile. "Chumps."

Their laughter echoes throughout the barren park as Wendy pockets her lighter. "Listen, Dipper. All joking aside, I'm sorry if I freaked you out with that kiss. I just hate seeing you like that, you know? You get so down that it's almost like you're not even here anymore, I thought if I... pfft. I don't even know what I thought." She rolls her eyes, flicking the smoking butt into the snow before affectionately tilting her head towards him. "You're one of the best people I know, Dip, you deserve to be happy. I just want you to be able to be happy."

She looks him right in the eye as she says this, earnest, yet still completely



calm and cool... and despite the heat that's still rushing through his cheeks, Dipper knows for certain that he shouldn't read too much into whatever happened earlier—other than the fact that Wendy is one devoted friend. He sits up straighter so he can throw an arm over her shoulders, turning his head to look out across the street, a small grin on his lips. “Nah, I get it. Thanks for looking out for me, Wendy.”

“Always, man.”

The two friends sit on the bench a short time longer, Wendy telling a story about what happened to Thompson at Tambry's holiday party last week while Dipper half-listens, his thoughts slowly but surely returning to that tiny pink jacket; only in his head it's being worn by a laughing little brunette girl that he is much, much more familiar with.

## Part 11

Svooth sits in the rocking chair humming a random tune, all eight of her legs folded daintily (well, as daintily as she can get them) underneath her as she rests her eyes. Meanwhile Mabel slouches cross-legged in her corner, trying to finish up her knitting for the day. The soft glow of the crystals scattered along the walls light up her handiwork as usual; she used to have to squint to knit down here, but not anymore. Now it's like her eyes have permanently adjusted to the dark. Sure does make it a lot easier to do things around here.

Push the needle through the loop. Then the other one. Under, over, under over. Her dirty fingers move efficiently, but robotically. There's not much joy in the activity anymore. Once her hobby was turned into a job—and a job she never signed up for—it kind of took the fun out of things.

Where does her Mama *get* all this material, anyway? Even if it is mostly dingy and dull, the stuff is supposed to be so scarce here, and yet Mama's supply has Mabel steadily churning out garments what seems like every few days. Well maybe not *day* days, since a day down here is the time when she wakes up to the time she curls up to go to sleep, and that's about all she has to go on.

Maybe Mama goes to the surface to get it, during those long hours when Mabel is left home alone. The surface...

The sound of Svooth's smooth, chilly voice interrupts Mabel's thoughts.

"Wind Mama's record player for her, won'tcha sugar?"

"Yeah, of course." Mabel sets down the half done skirt and hops to her feet straight away, walking over to the infamous old record player in the center of the burrow.

Who knows how the woman ended up with it, but this thing is something Mabel quickly became *realll* familiar with upon coming to live with in his burrow. It's old and dilapidated and the sound quality is horrible; not to mention Mama only has a few records, most of which are singles. So every day, Mabel's had to listen to the same few old, scratchy tunes. It's gotten to the point that she's heard them all so many times that those few songs don't even drive her crazy

anymore, they just... haunt her.

She glances down at the selection that's currently sitting in the platter. *Of course*, it's her least favorite one. There's only one song on this particular vinyl, and it's the hardest of all of them for her ears to drown out the lyrics. She's about to switch the record out for another when Mama clicks her tongue, stopping her.

"Leave that one on, babydoll. I'm feelin' in the mood for it."

Her heart drops, but Mabel doesn't protest, setting the vinyl between her hands gently back down in the platter. Winding the crank several times, she brings out the needle drops it where it needs to be, then walks silently back to her corner. As she picks her knitting back up, scratchy, poignant notes begin to ring out and fill up the burrow. The first lyrics reach Mabel's ears and her eyes glaze over, the needles in her hands coming to a standstill.

*Under a blanket of blue  
Just you and I beneath the stars...*

Stars. Ugh, this stupid song. Always with the dumb stars.

She used to love stars. Draw them everywhere, cover everything she owned with glittery stickers shaped like them, lay in the grass at night, someone next to her pointing out the shapes they made in the sky... she doesn't remember the names of any of the constellations though. Well, except for one.

Oh no. Don't think about it, Mabel. It's such a bad idea to think about it. It never ends happily.

*Ugh.*

There are times when she's sure she's perfected the art of forgetting, and she can go what seems like forever with a nice, blank brain... but then days like today happen, when her brain refuses to cooperate, and for the first time in a long time, Mabel lets her mind wander freely. Resting her head against the dirt wall and shutting her eyes, the mental floodgates open, and suddenly she's lost in the wistful thought that somewhere up above, life goes on without her. Thinks about how instead of a Mama, there was a time where she used to have friends, a pet pig, a stingy great uncle, a dad... a mom. And a brother.

Her eyes flicker underneath her eyelids as the crackling song drones on.

*The night would be tragic  
If you weren't here  
To share it my dear...*

Dipper. That's his name—her brother's. Like the Big Dipper. *Ursa Major*. He had a special mark on his forehead, shaped like it. Shaped like the stars. She remembers. This song is always reminding her when she lets it, and sometimes, so do her dreams.

Mabel wonders what he could be doing right this second. Sleeping, maybe? Is it almost bedtime up there too? She wonders if he ever still thinks about her, or if he's just given up. Accepted her loss and moved on. It's been a long time. Probably better if it's the second one, right? For... for his sake. It's better if he forgets about her rather than sit around missing her. But the thought of him, of her parents, of the rest of the world up there moving on without her leaves her belly feeling empty, and not just because she didn't finish her dinner tonight.

They're up there, and she's down here. It's just the way things are, now.

Dang. How did she even get to this point, anyway? It's all so fuzzy. Down here it's been the same, day in and day out, for so long. Wake up. Force down the gunk in the wooden bowl that Mama presents her with. Do Mama's knitting. Wind the record player. Draw in the dirt, and maybe on the rocks jutting out of the dirt with the charcoal she sometimes receives in her gift pile. Sit quietly with Mama. When they leave the burrow every now and then, stay at Mama's side at all times. Nap. Knit. Do as Mama says. Force down the gunk in the bowl a second time. Curl up in the leaf pile, hope for dreamless sleep. It's hard to believe that anything else existed before this.

Mabel racks her brain, trying not to become frustrated. The record skips, that same song starting up all over again, just as a few memories struggle back into the light. Okay. She'd been wearing a pink striped sweater. She knows that for sure because Mama still wears it occasionally, although the pink color has become more of a dingy grayish-salmon. And then there was... a kite. A yellow one. Oh yeah... she'd made it. She'd been flying it when she fell. And Dipper. He was supposed to be there flying kites too, but he wasn't. Because... because... that's right, they were fighting. But about what?

Mabel tries with all her might to remember, but nothing comes to mind.

What *would* they have been fighting about? It doesn't really matter, but now she's gotten herself all curious-like. She doesn't remember her and Dipper fighting all that much in general. When she thinks of Dipper, she mostly recalls his smile and his squeaky puberty laugh, although his face is blurry. She remembers that they used to hang out a lot, do a ton of fun stuff together. Yeah. Their relationship had involved a lot of laughing and smiling, with some good old fashioned fun poking and sibling squabbles, but it hadn't involved yelling, not really. He was always so patient with her. And he never made fun of her or anything, no matter how weird she got.

Huh. What memory puzzle piece is she missing, here? Her lips purse in deep thought.

There *was* the fact that he was a pretty sore loser. Maybe the fight had something to do with that?

A smile comes to her face when a memory much more streamlined than the other flickery ones pops into her head. Randomly enough, it's about a very heated game of Monopoly her and Dipper had played at some point in their childhood—well, heated on his part, anyway. She'd been totally owning that game, much to her brother's annoyance. He kept landing on her hotels, and she'd just grinned and laughed, watching him hand over more and more fake money and get more and more frustrated by the second, but refuse to admit defeat. Seeing Dipper's sensitive boy feathers all ruffled up about stupid stuff like a weenie little peacock was *always* entertaining. Mabel's smile grows wider as the memory continues to play like a tape, fuzzily and crackily, just like the record. He'd landed on her hotel on Boardwalk, on the verge of fake-bankruptcy as she'd chanted her own name in victory, right in his ear. And that seemed to be the last straw for him that day, and like a big baby he'd flipped the game board, sending pieces everywhere before announcing that he wasn't going to play anymore. On his stomp-fest out of the living room she'd tackled him from behind, demanding he admit she was the ultimate Monopoly Master, giving him with a sound wedgie at his shout of "*Never!*"

Gosh. Her brother was always such a *weenie* about that stuff. Like, to the point of hilarity. But that'd been fine with her, because he was her weenie. And whenever the two of them had those dumb little fights, she's one-hundred-

percent certain that all was forgotten by dinnertime, the two back to being best friend-sibs in no time flat. Her bro was cool like that.

The record skips again, but she's too wrapped up in her thoughts to even be the slightest bit annoyed.

*Hee, hee.* And now she's remembering one time when they were little and he'd been so furious at her for cheating over a game of checkers that he'd actually gotten *teary eyed*. She hadn't let that one go by dinnertime. Sure, the situation had involved a bit of innocent cajoling on her part, but still. You can't cry over checkers and not expect to get at least a *teensy* bit of flak for it...

The sound of twinkling laughter reaches her ears, and it's only when Mama demands from across the room, "what the devil is so *funny*, child?" that Mabel realizes that the laughter is coming from her.

"Nothing, Mama." She replies quickly.

The final notes of the song linger in the air around her, the record probably on the verge of skipping yet again, and for the thousandth time, Mabel is remembering exactly why it's a bad idea to go and recall things like stars and Dipper and checkers.

Yeah. No more of that, Mabel.

She dares one last tiny noise—something between a giggle and a choke—before falling silent, a thick wet droplet rolling steadily down the side her rapidly withering face. Her fingers find their way up to the largest bead of the wooden necklace that hangs around her neck, twisting it fiercely round and round until Mabel feels nothing at all.

*No more.*

---

The floor of the attic creaks heavily when Dipper carefully lowers himself down on it, cross-legged, bringing a two layer chocolate cake with him. The cake is a little lopsided and there are a few patches he failed to spread Funfetti icing on, but it'll do. It looks a hell of a lot better than last year's cake, anyway.

He places the platter on the floor, bringing a hand to his mouth to lick off

some icing that had escaped onto his fingers while he was carrying it up from the kitchen. Sugary sweetness bursts on his tongue and his thoughts randomly jump to a memory from their ninth birthday, when he and Mabel had ended up playfully smearing icing all over each other's faces after she'd laughingly traced his birthmark with a Funfetti-globbed finger. 'Dipfettihead' had served as her nickname of choice for him for at least two weeks afterwards.

Dipper stares down at his less than perfect creation with weary, ringed eyes. Funfetti was her favorite.

Something in his chest tightens and he fiercely corrects himself.

*Is. Is* her favorite.

What is wrong with him today?

He lifts his hat to run a shaky hand through his hair before yanking it back down on his head. Reaching over his shoulder, he retrieves a colorful package from his bedspread, holding it delicately in his fingers as he turns back around to face the empty bed across from his.

The pink blanket is dingy from the now thick layer of dust that covers it, that faded orange tiger stuffed animal smiling at him as always. A few posters of some particularly annoying and out of date boy bands still plastered to the wall. Purple cowboy boots sit limply on the floor at the foot of the bed, along with some neatly stacked books, toys, and art supplies, a half-eaten jumbo bag of sour gummy koalas, and a large closed trunk that he knows is full of at least twenty-eight colorful and wacky sweaters.

His therapist keeps giving him these 'gentle reminders' that it's not healthy, not quote-unquote *in his best interests* to live in a room full of Mabel's long untouched things. Like it's some sort of shrine or something.

Well, fuck his therapist. Excuse him for wanting to keep her stuff neat and prepared for when she finally comes home. Although he didn't ask for one, Stan wordlessly bought a plain white room divider a couple years back. On really bad nights, Dipper drags it out and forces himself to hide away her side of the room. But the vast majority of time it leans folded up against the wall amongst the attic junk behind the curtain.

“I got you something,” his voice breaks through the silence and echoes through the moldy rafters. He glances down at the package in his hands, the nail of his pointer finger absentmindedly picking at the shiny pink ribbon that wraps around it. The wrapping paper is covered in dancing monkeys wearing sunglasses and disco-era threads. He’d seen it at the store yesterday while out picking up groceries with Stan and snatched it right up, since the stuff had practically screamed Mabel.

“You’re gonna love this, Mabel,” Dipper continues, smiling softly at the floorboards. “I mean you never shut up about how learning to play the ukulele was your true calling, so. How could I not, right?”

He sighs deeply, bringing a hand up to scratch at the subtle scruff that lines his jaw, lifting his gaze back to the pink blanket. “I know it’s probably stupid to be getting you this since you can’t actually play it right now, but I... I mean, you understand, right? The birthday thing. I know you’d understand.” He swallows. “It’ll just be sort of belated. You’re gonna jam hard on this thing one day, I promise.”

His lackluster smile faded at some point during his little speech and he scrubs at his eyes with his thumb and forefinger.

God, he’s talking to a bed. If she could only see him now, she’d probably be giggling at him. Maybe letting loose a snort or two for added effect.

What he *wouldn’t fucking give* to hear that goofy laugh again.

Dipper heaves himself up, trudging over to slip the box under her bed. He hears it knock into two other colorfully wrapped packages, one of which has been sitting there undisturbed for one year and the other for two.

He doesn’t know why he did it in the first place, and he doesn’t know why he’s doing it again. Except, that’s a lie, he *knows* why. He just wouldn’t be able to explain it to anybody without receiving an awkward beat of silence and pity eyes. They wouldn’t understand. Nobody could, nobody but her. Birthdays were their *thing*. Just the two of them. That’s why he has to do this alone, late at night, away from the eyes of Stan or Soos or his visiting parents.

Partly he’s doing this for himself. It’s his little way of staying strong and purging the broken feelings now instead of later, so tomorrow he won’t



completely shrivel up into a ball as his heartbroken family pretends to celebrate for his sake. But mostly he's doing it so Mabel will see that he didn't forget her on their birthday; he's doing it for the look on her face when she opens her vintage *Sailor Moon* t-shirt and book of 500 glittery kitten stickers and brand new ukulele. She'll probably squeal and throw her arms around his neck in that too-tight hug n' shake thing she does, maybe even kiss his cheek... hopefully kiss his cheek.

Yep, his therapist would definitely deem all of this unhealthy. Whatever.

Dipper walks back over to his side of the room to flop down in front of the cake that's still sitting on the floor. Digging a lighter out of his pocket, he stares blankly at the words clumsily written in icing as he lights each of the candles that are jammed around the edge of the cake.

He's only been gazing into the flickering flames for a minute or two when his watch beeps. He rolls up the sleeve of his thin flannel, blindly clicking off the alarm, not even bothering to look at the glowing digital numbers. There's no need. He knows it's midnight. He knows this is yet another birthday he's going to have alone.

Wax starts to drip into the rainbow speckled icing. Dipper shuts his eyes tight, pausing for a moment, then leans forward.

"Happy Birthday, Mabel," he whispers to no one, blowing out all sixteen candles in one breath.

## Part 12

Pink rays of sunlight are starting to trickle through the triangle-shaped window of the attic, causing the hunched over figure at a desk in the corner to turn towards the soft light with bleary eyes.

Dipper runs a frustrated hand through his hair, causing the greasy brown curls to stick up in all sorts of directions. Another all-nighter. Damn. Just a second ago he'd checked his watch and the numbers blinked back 2:15 am. How did this keep happening to him?

The precariously-balanced open notebook in his lap finally starts to slip, and he tilts his head down just in time to see it hit the floor. No sleep sure does wonders for his reflexes. He curses, cracking his neck before slowly bending to gather up both pen and chicken-scratch notes, not unlike a zombie. He's not even sure why he's still awake. It's getting pretty obvious he's not getting anywhere with what he's working on tonight. To be honest he's much closer to banging his head violently against his keyboard than reaching any breakthroughs in terms of his current 'where's Mabel' theory.

The thick socks covering Dipper's feet must mean nothing to the early morning February air, because he can't feel his toes. Which is funny, since the extreme aggravation he's been feeling for the past couple hours or so is making the rest of his body uncomfortably hot. He's still wearing the semi-clean jeans and sweatshirt he tugged on the morning before, a silver and blue Ravenclaw scarf—Mabel had knitted it for him way back when they were ten and both still in their *Harry Potter* phases, whipping up a Gryffindor one for herself—wrapped snugly around his neck. Sweat breaks out underneath it and Dipper absentmindedly gives a few tugs to the worn knit fabric, but doesn't take it off.

Would it even be worth attempting sleep at this point? Didn't he have to be up in a few hours for something or other? After a few beats of spacey thinking it clicks, and the boy slumps back in his chair to let out a tired groan towards the drafty roof over his head. That's right. Tomorrow is Soos' Grandma's birthday. As a gift Soos wants to clean all the heaping piles of junk out of her backyard, and yesterday Dipper promised he would help. His man-child of a best friend is picking him up early this morning so they can get the job done together and maybe still have time to hit up the arcade after.

The thought of piling heavy, musty-smelling things into the back of Soos' truck all day is really not helping the bubbling irritation in his stomach.

Rubbing at his eyes, Dipper hunches back over his keyboard, trying to once again focus on figuring out a way to communicate with elves.

Yup... he was on elves now these days. It wasn't all that farfetched of a theory, since his notes told him that they were a relatively peaceful, but controlling race of supernatural creatures. Persuasive and alluring as well, to an almost magical extent, and with a, '*great love of beautiful objects and specimens*,' if his notes weren't mistaken. Which he has made painstakingly sure that they aren't. So his hypothesis? A pretty, vulnerable thirteen-year-old girl had wandered into elf territory, the elves subsequently took a liking to her or something, because in all honesty, Mabel definitely could, and more than likely still can be classified as 'beautiful,' and somehow they'd hypnotized her into staying through their creepy weird powers of persuasion.

All Dipper had to do was find out where exactly they lived, find Mabel, snap her out of her elf spell and *ta-da*—everyone lives happily ever after. That's the simple version of the plan, at least. At this point, he doesn't even care if he's reaching anymore. Nor would he ever admit that he's reaching. But he's exhausted so many theories and leads by now, some darker than others... the image a certain demon pops into Dipper's head and he immediately squeezes his eyes shut, banishing the thought and any associated memories. Okay. He'll be the first to admit it—he's pulled some stupid shit over the past few years. Yes, it was all in the name of finding his sister, sure, he'd never managed to actually screw up past the point of no return (as in his own return, not Mabel's), but still... stupid shit. So yeah. He will take elves. Elves are nice. Elves are simple.

The problem was, elves were so secretive. So far his research has led him to believe that they live deep in the forest on the side of one of the surrounding mountains, making the actual physical search neither easy nor short. And maybe most annoying of all, they don't speak English. A week ago, Dipper had actually managed to capture one of the small, wispy creatures, but any questions he'd asked it were responded to with squeaky gibberish. Getting nowhere, he'd been forced to let it go, failing miserably at following it back to wherever it came from after it darted into a thicket of bramble bushes.

Pulling thorns out of his butt later that night? Not so fun. At least he'd

recorded almost everything the elf had muttered to him on his phone; he'd spent the last week trying to decipher it, because who knows? Maybe he has all the answers right here with him, if only he could just understand them.

*Easier said than friggin' done*, Dipper thinks cynically, his tired eyes scrolling through page after page of articles about fusional languages and morphology on his laptop. He's smart, but as much as he hates to admit it, he's not a genius. Figuring out the linguistic patterns of elvish enough to be able to communicate with them was beyond tough, no matter *what* he google searched or how many books on ancient languages he checked out at the library.

Full blown sunlight begins to flood the room, hurting Dipper's LED screen-trained eyes. He should really invest in some curtains or blinds or something. Yet another page about how to learn elvish from *Lord of the Rings* pops up in front of him, and the sixteen-year-old glares at the screen.

"Great, thanks," he mutters in a gravelly voice, his features springing into a sarcastic leer. "So helpful!"

It's clear he's not going to be having any 'eureka' moments right now. For the seventh day in a row. And he's got so much homework to catch up on, a paper to write on *Beowulf* that he's been blowing off for over a week, extra long shifts ahead at work Friday *and* Saturday night and... ugh, he can practically feel the bags under his eyes. And he's pretty sure that ripe smell offending his nose is himself, jeez, when was the last time he had a shower? Oh yeah, and in a few hours he gets to spend the entire day doing back-breaking amounts of cleaning, with Soos' abuelita force feeding him her specialty super-gross oatmeal cookies that he's always too polite to refuse.

And just... fuck. Fucking fuck fuck fuck.

Dipper clicks into his email, his dried out eyes routinely scanning for any hits or tips directed from Mabel's '*Have you seen me?*' website that'd been up for a few years now. His mouth forms a flat line. There's nothing, as usual. And maybe nothing is better than those hundreds of somethings he and his parents would receive back in the day that always, always led to a dead end... but not today. Today he's boiling over with annoyance and anger and exasperation and to be honest he's getting really fucking tired of both nothing and dead ends.

Slamming his computer shut, Dipper lets his forehead rest on his desk for a

minute before springing to his feet, almost knocking his chair over in the process. His skin still feels so hot, too hot, so he wrestles out of his scarf and his sweatshirt, collapsing into bed in his wrinkled jeans and t-shirt. He squeezes his eyelids shut, trying to relax, giving up after a few seconds to simply glower at the ceiling. Blood pumps furiously through his veins, preventing the overwhelming exhaustion from taking over, leaving him ready to burst with frustration. He's itching to get up and *do* something, or—or kick something over maybe, and he just—he needs—he needs to—

Before Dipper's brain can even catch up with his body he's already undone his belt, yanked down his fly and shoved a jumpy hand inside his underwear, taking himself in a firm grip and pivoting his wrist in that hasty, steadfast way he knows will get the job done quickly. *Ugh*. This isn't the first time he's given himself a hard-on out of sheer fucking aggravation. All he really wants right now is that feeling of release his body is all but screaming for, to take some of this teeth-grinding edge off. There's a brief pause in the frantic back and forth movements as Dipper lifts his hips and aggressively tugs down both jeans and underwear, just far enough to free his erection, then jumps right back into it, one hand quickly stroking and squeezing while the other reaches up to slip between his hair and the pillow, gripping the back of his head.

He's already starting to feel better, the anger becoming overridden by the physical pleasure, those dangerously high stress levels gradually dissipating. His seething frown fades, his brow relaxing, and he lets out a long sigh. A shiver runs down the length of Dipper's spine and his eyes drift closed, his head tilting back into the pillow. Various images of women doing things that would make his grandmother forcefully sit him down and read him Bible verses begin to flicker on the backs of his eyelids. Dipper doesn't have many females in his life besides Wendy—and that ship sailed a long time ago—so they're mostly random, nameless girls his mind cooks up on its own, using all the uh, 'personal computer time' he's had as inspiration. All brunette, all pretty lithe and smaller in stature... his mouth opens in a silent groan. He grunts and huffs, prompting his hand to move faster, the muscles in his stomach and thighs tightening.

Seemingly out nowhere Dipper's mind betrays him by wondering what Mabel would like now, at sixteen, and then, considering his current activities, "casually" wondering what she might look like naked and then—

Oh no. Crap crap crap... no. *No!* Fight it man. *Fight it.*

But there doesn't seem to be enough blood left in his brain to stop himself, and soon the mental image of the nameless brunette is being replaced by his version of an older Mabel. Her smiling face is a little fuzzy but her hair is long and shiny and cascading over her bare shoulders in an almost mesmerizing way, her hand small, soft, and flawless as it takes over for his own, gently curling around him. God, she's gorgeous—and, and then he's taking her in his arms and pulling her into him and kissing her, *hard*, and then she moans into his mouth and it's hot and perfect and—

Oh shit.

He hears himself just barely whisper her name through his heavy breaths right before he finishes, that blissful feeling of release rippling over his tired body. A quiet moan strains out from between his lips.

At first Dipper is filled with warm satisfaction as he just lies there, breathing hard and covered in sweat, his former frustrations nowhere to be found. But the contentment doesn't last long. A chill sets in fast, his skin going cold and clammy. He lifts a hand to cover his crumbling face, any and all satisfied feelings he was just enjoying swapping out for a sinking, nauseated feeling in his gut.

What... is he doing. What the fuck... what... is he *doing* getting off to his *sister*. No, not just his sister—his sister, and *him, together*? His sister who's been missing, who's going through god knows what, who he hasn't even seen in well over two years?

Christ. That's just sick. He's a sick person. Someone seriously needs to come and take him away, lock him up where the sun don't shine, because clearly he has got some gross fucking *issues*, man.

Dipper takes in a shuddering breath and withdraws the hand from his flaming red face, swiping the pillow out from underneath his head and bringing it down to muffle the discouraged growl that comes bursting from his chest.

What the hell is wrong with him! Never again, he'd said. He vowed to himself that he would *never* let that happen again. And of course, what did he go and do? His willpower is about as weak as his upper body strength!

All those embarrassing dreams he used to have about Mabel when he was

younger, he'd thought they would've gone away after all the initial tragedy struck. But they didn't. And after awhile they just got worse, and more detailed, and now the incessant fantasies have graduated from the subconscious to the very much conscious level, and it's getting harder to come up with rational excuses for all these wildly inappropriate thoughts he *still* has about his twin sister. His *missing* twin sister. And to say the least, it's really, really freaking him out.

You know what? No. Just—no. He can't deal with this right now. He won't. Spending time tossing and turning and trying to figure out whether all of this means he might have... *ugh... feelings* for Mabel is not his priority. And he doesn't plan on letting it become his priority. *Ever*. For fuck's sake, she doesn't need her brother lusting after her like some inbred pervert, she needs him to be out there looking for her! She needs him to find her, she needs him to bring her home...

Dipper moves the pillow off his head, blinking in mortified disbelief.

God. He needs help.

Tiredly he lifts an arm up to bring his watch into view. It's 7:05... he has about two hours before Soos comes cheerily busting through the rickety attic door, ripping off his blanket and shooting him in the back with a water gun or something, telling him "*up and at 'em, dawg!*" Dipper lets his arm drop back to the bed, digging into his eyes with the heel of his palm. He's exhausted. Might as well try and get some sleep, even though he's going to be dead on his feet today no matter what... for a number of reasons.

Wriggling out of his stained t-shirt, Dipper uses it to guiltily mop himself up as fast as possible. The incriminating shirt gets discarded in the crevice between his bed and the wall, and he tucks himself back into his underwear, his cheeks burning with shame. Ugh. Sick, Dipper. Sick, sick, sick.

He kicks off his jeans, gathering up the blanket that had been pushed to the end of the bed and pulling it over himself. Setting his pillow back in its rightful place, he feebly smacks his fist into the lumps a few times before gathering it under his arms and laying on his stomach. By now the room is ablaze with bright sunlight, leaving the worn out teenager grumbling and attempting to block out the morning sun by rolling his face into his pillow.

After a few deep breaths Dipper allows his drained muscles to relax into the mattress, closing his eyes and whispering out a quiet apology to Mabel.

Never again.

And this time he means it, dammit.

---

“It’s for the best, sugar pie.”

Mabel nods, not daring to let out another sniff. Mama is not in a mood where she would be sympathetic to any tears.

Cool metal grazes the back of her neck, causing Mabel to shiver, as the *clip, clip, clip* of the shears clicks in her ears. Locks of brown hair continue to rain down to the floor of the burrow, one tiny curl at a time.

She can’t see it, and she never will since she’s not allowed to use Mama’s one and only cracked hand mirror, but she can already sense how short it is, no longer able to feel the hair that usually tickles the back of her neck. Mama has never cut it this short before. But until today the mayor had never been so... *blatant* in his attraction to Mabel before, either, so. There’s that.

More tears pool in her eyes as she thinks back to earlier that night. She swallows, blinking fiercely, trying not to shudder. Mama and the Mayor had returned to the burrow for a nightcap after one of their usual outings. Mabel was in her room, curled up in her makeshift bed, sleepily listening in on the sounds of the record player, of drinks clinking, of the usual coy, and in her opinion very very creepy, flirting between the two. She remembers pulling her blanket up to her chin when she heard overheard the Mayor asking about her, and Mama’s response of, “My babydoll’s in bed for the night, an’ she won’t be comin’ out to say hello today.” She felt a little safer after that.

But then Svooth had strode down the narrow hall to her own room, to “Change into somethin’ a bit more comfy.” She’d only been gone for a second. But a second was enough for the Mayor.

Mabel shivers as she relives the sound of her little wooden bedroom door scraping open. Of that gargantuan, hungry presence in her doorway, blocking out the dim light of the crystals behind him. She did her best to pretend she was



asleep, her back to the doorway and shaking under her blanket, that large bead of her necklace clutched in her fist, hoping desperately that he would just leave. No such luck. She'd laid frozen with terror and dread as she felt the moleman looming over her, heard his whisper of how nicely she'd grown up as he not-so-gently ran a huge paw through her soft, shoulder length hair.

She remembers frantically wondering why Mama wasn't there when she'd smelled his rancid breath, his long, crooked snout sniffing the air near her face. She remembers opening her mouth to scream when he'd ripped her blanket away and pushed down on her shoulder to make her face him, but no scream had come, only a tiny, terrified squeak. "So soft and beautiful," he'd said, the words filling Mabel with the urge to vomit. And then he'd run his paw down the length of her body. That time she really did scream, breaking out of her frozen state, her limbs throwing rogue kicks and punches. He'd tried to cover her mouth, and she bit him. Mama had rushed in just as the Mayor was backing off, howling in pain, and had immediately swooped in between the Mayor and her baby. There was a lot of yelling, claims of disobedience and threats to break certain arrangements before the irate moleman had stormed out of the burrow.

Granted, Mama's response to the whole situation hadn't exactly been what Mabel was hoping for. But at least the Mayor hadn't touched her anymore after that. A tear rolls down the side of Mabel's cheek. She quickly wipes it away.

"There. All done," Mama says, laying the silver shears on the dresser. Mabel automatically reaches back to feel the results of her newest haircut. All of her curls are gone, uneven tufts cropped closely to the back of her skull in their place. Her lips purse tightly, and she wraps her arms around herself. Okay. It's just hair, Mabel. Right? You don't have to cry over this. Over any of this. Don't cry. Don't cry...

"I hope we can all learn something from this," Svooth breaks the silence, adjusting the knit shawl around her shoulders and she slowly walks around to stand in front of the small, hunched over girl sitting on a stool in the middle of the burrow. Mabel doesn't look up, instead keeping her eyes trained on the brown curls at her feet.

"The Mayor is very special to me. You know that, child." Mama's tone is stern and chilly.

“I’m sorry, Mama,” Mabel says, wringing her hands, voice barely above a whisper.

Mama slips a paw under Mabel’s chin, tilting her head up until she’s forced to look up into those four strikingly blue eyes. “Now, I know ya didn’t mean nothin’ by it. But yer not to look at ‘im, not t’speak to him ever again, ya hear? We can’t afford to have you indulging his temptations.”

Mabel nods quickly, looking back down to the floor again. Swooth gives her a small smile, patting her head. “Let’s jus’ focus on puttin’ this whole nonsense behind us, alright? Mama’s had a long day.”

The molewoman walks over to sit herself down in the rocking chair, closing her eyes and sighing. Mabel stays put, her arms coming around herself once again. She keeps staring blankly at her hair all over the floor, her vision blurred. She can still hear that slippery voice in her ear. Smell the stench of his breath. Feel those claws through her dress, trailing along her chest and down her stomach. She hugs herself tighter and tighter, her dirty nails digging into her skin.

Don’t cry. Do not cry.

“Babydoll,” Mama calls out wearily, her chair creaking as it rocks back and forth.

“Mhm?” Mabel croaks.

“Come over here and cuddle with your Mama,” Swooth hums.

Mabel hesitates for only a second. The she’s getting to her feet, taking robotic steps over to Mama’s open arms, crawling up into her waiting lap. As soon as the girl feels those protective arms close around her the dam in her eyes breaks, her shoulders beginning to shake.

“Sh, sh,” the molewoman coos, rocking Mabel slightly in her strong, furry arms. “Now, now. Yer still pretty to me, my little babydoll.”

Mabel blinks. Oh. Mama thinks she’s crying over having all her hair cut off. That’s good. Because she doesn’t think she can hold this off anymore. She needs to cry. She needs Mama to hold her close and not be mad at her anymore. She

needs to feel safe again.

She buries her face in Mama's fur, gripping back tightly, choking out a sob. Mama just continues to shush her gently, rocking her back and forth. "I love you more'n anything, babydoll," she says softly, stroking Mabel's hair. "Don't you forget that."

Mabel snuggles closer at the loving words, tears leaking from her eyes. "I won't," she whispers. "I love you too."

## Part 13

Dipper watches his dad settle into a chair at the table as he leans against the living room wall, absentmindedly twiddling a pen between his fingers. The elder Pines male folds his hands on the table's surface and looks at Dipper expectantly, wearing a small smile.

“Why don’tcha come take a seat, Dip?”

He shrugs. “Nah, it’s fine. ‘Bout to head out anyway, gotta return some books before the library closes.” He quirks his lips into a friendly half-smile. “So what’s up, Papa Smurf? Thought you guys weren’t coming up ‘til Friday. Not that it’s not great to see you or anything.”

And it really was great to see his dad, even if he is acting a little funny.

“Oh, well, I decided to come a few days ahead of your mom. Hope that’s all right with you.”

Dipper shakes his head, quick to reassure him. “No, it’s great, I’m glad you’re here.” He throws a glance over his shoulder towards the door to the gift shop. “Sorry I gotta rush out on you like this... Hey, as soon as I get back, how ‘bout you, me and Stan have another Pines family poker night? I won’t be gone that long.”

“Sounds great kiddo, but is the book thing urgent? I wanted to talk to you about something.”

The pen stills in Dipper’s hand. “Well, kinda... Plus, I wanted to look into something while I’m there. It’s just, I—I might have another lead, so...” he trails off, averting his eyes to the carpet. His father had never outright told him so, but Dipper’s pretty sure that at this point the guy has mixed feelings about his son’s obsessive search for his lost daughter.

Nothing but silence greets his ears as he waits for a response, prompting Dipper to look back up and raise an eyebrow. Warning bells start blaring in his head when he does. Dad is staring through him, patting the chair next to him, the smile on his face not really reaching his eyes anymore.

“Come sit down, Dipper. The books can wait, right now there’s something we need to talk about.”

Immediately he can feel himself start to shut down, his body tensing up; conversations with his parents that start like this have always led to the same thing, and Dipper already knows he doesn’t want to hear it. “No, I’m good over here.”

His dad tries to maintain his half smile despite Dipper’s curt tone. “Alright, fine. But I want you to listen to me before you go and start reacting. Your mom and I have been discussing this a lot, ever since you moved up here, to be honest... Dipper, you know it’s been hard on her, not having you around. On me too.”

God, please don’t let this be going where he thinks it’s going. He’s really tired of arguing about this.

The tired looking man at the table continues. “But you put up so much of a fight, and we knew Stan would take good care of you, so we agreed to let you stay—” Dad shifts his gaze to look Dipper straight in the eye, “—so long as we thought you could handle it.”

“Dad—”

“And maybe you were, at one point, but we both know that’s not the case anymore.”

There’s a pause, almost as if he’s waiting for agreement, or an acknowledgement; Dipper gives him neither but he still manages to keep his semi-cheery approach.

“It’s time to come *home*, Dip. Get you back in a real school. Maybe get reacquainted with your old friends... Reid and Matt still ask about you, you know. I’m willing to bet they still miss their pal. And I know your mother wants more than anything to have you around the house again, it’ll be good for you to —”

“Look, I appreciate what you’re trying to do, Dad. I get it. But Mabel needs me here.”

When he says her name he can see his dad's face flinch, his smile wilting. Dipper just stands there stiffly, warily watching the man across the table let out a frustrated sigh, looking pained.

"Dipper, this isn't a request."

The boy's eyebrows furrow together. "Uh, okay..." He laughs uneasily only because he doesn't know what else to do, shifting his glance to the side, subtly bouncing from foot to foot. "What do you mean by that."

Dad looks at him meaningfully. "I think you know what I mean. Mom's coming up Friday, and we're all going to help with the move. You included."

The halfhearted smile on Dipper's face drops like a stone. He feels his heart start to thump rapidly, his skin heating up. He can hardly even believe what he's hearing. This isn't the first time this subject has been brought up, but it is the first time he isn't being given a choice in the matter.

And that's... that's *bullshit*.

He crosses his arms and turns away, glaring. "No. You can't just—okay whatever, forget it, I'm not going to go."

"It's not a negotiation either, Dipper. This is a long time coming, and you know it. There've been some troubling phone calls from Stan that we just can't ignore."

His jaw drops. He can't believe that after everything, Grunkle Stan would go and betray him like this.

"So now you've got Stan in on this too! Well that's just *great!*" Dipper throws his arms in the air, snorting out a cynical laugh.

"We're all just trying to do what's best for you."

His fists clench. *No*. They can't make him leave. Not now. He rakes shaky fingers through his hair, spinning around frantically to face his father, desperate to make him understand.

"Oh, come on! *She's* what's best for me! Getting her back is what's best for

me! And I would *think* the same thing should apply to you!”

Dad gets quiet for a second, then speaks. “Believe me. There’s nothing I want more than to have your sister back safe. Nothing,” he says, his voice soft. “But right now I’m not talking about my daughter, I’m talking about my son, who’s dedicating all of his time and energy to something that’s not—that’s not his responsibility.” He shakes his head. “You need to clear your head. And I don’t think you can do it as long as you’re living in this house. You’ve obviously needed this for awhile, and I’m only sorry it took me this long to do something about it... but you’re never going to do so if you keep obsessing over things none of us can control.”

Dipper is losing this battle and he knows it, and it’s causing him to panic and pace back and forth on the carpet, furiously racking his brain for a way out.

“No. You don’t understand, like—there are so many things I haven’t looked into yet, Dad, I mean seriously, you wouldn’t even believe—I, I promise if you just give me a few more—”

He turns to see his father sadly shaking his head. The feeling of being trapped in a rapidly shrinking box gets stronger and stronger, making the anger he keeps stored away in his gut claw at his insides, fighting hard to get out.

“*Why* are you trying so hard to get me to give up on her!”

Dad shuts his eyes, rubbing them with a thumb and forefinger. “*Dipper.*”

“Because obviously you and mom have—what, ya can’t be satisfied until the whole family’s given up hope?” The words come spitting harshly out of Dipper’s mouth, tears forming in his eyes, making everything blurry.

It’s not so blurry that he can’t see the pity forming on his dad’s face, though, which only makes his anger harder to reel in. He’s not listening to him. Just looking at him like he’s gone crazy, or something. The urge to rip out his own hair and scream gets stronger. *Why* won’t anybody ever fucking listen to him? Dipper is about to ask this aloud, but chokes on the huge lump that has formed in his throat, so instead he just stands there, blinking rapidly at the floor.

“Dipper. You—you’re not *thriving* up here. You obviously don’t get enough sleep, you’re falling behind in school, you skip your therapy—” Dipper’s eyes

widen a little which prompts Dad to give him a stern look. “Oh yes, Mom and I know about that. You need to get out of this house and start thinking about what’s best for *you*. All you’re doing here is driving yourself into the ground, I’m not going to just stand by and watch it happen!”

Dipper’s teeth gnash together behind trembling lips. His dad is wrong, so, so, *wrong*. Implying the last three years of searching and dedicated research and sleepless nights have been all for nothing, how could he just...? Just... no. No! This is *not* all for nothing. Mabel’s still out there, waiting for him—probably the only person who’s still *actually looking*— to find her. He has to believe it. He has to.

“I know it’s hard. And the last thing we’re doing is asking you to move on. But Dip, at this point you... *Jesus*, son, you’ve got to accept the possibility that —”

White-hot anger scorches through Dipper like lightning, and suddenly he hears himself shouting.

“*She’s—not—dead!*”

He’s breathing hard, his hands curled into fists so tight that his fingernails dig marks into his palms. Dad falls silent, looking wounded, looking at Dipper as if he’s just meeting him for the first time. A heavy, foreboding air swirls and settles between them, as father and son stare each other down, both stricken, both almost able to physically feel the substantial rift between them split even wider.

The silence lingers before an uncharacteristically steely expression appears on his dad’s face. “I’m not going to change my mind about this, Dipper. I’m sorry.”

He’s *sorry*?!

He can hardly get air into his lungs, he’s so angry. They can’t just fucking do this to him—pack him up and take him away, force him to move on like everybody else already has. Well screw all of them, he’s not going to move on. He won’t. *He can’t*.

Dipper’s jaw sets so tightly that it hurts. Hoarse words come choking out of



him just before his throat closes up completely.

“I-I *hate* you.”

The air in the living room goes cold, a broken look sweeping over the older man’s face.

“...I’m sorry you feel that way,” is the quiet reply that breaks the silence. “But you’re still moving back home at the end of the week.”

There’s a jarring finality in his dad’s eyes that says much more than words ever could.

There’s no stopping this. This is going to happen... This is happening.

Something inside of Dipper finally breaks. Something that had been slowly becoming weaker and weaker for a long time. It snaps clean in two, right down the middle, the sharp, shattered fragments raining down and stabbing him all over. His hands start to shake and it feels like an elephant just sat on his chest and—and he has to get out of here. He has to leave. Right now.

Harshly turning his back on his dad, Dipper pushes through the door to the gift shop, ignoring the soft call of his name behind him. He walks evenly through the bustling shop, focusing his blurred vision on the exit. He bumps shoulders with several customers without bothering to apologize, doesn’t even turn his head when Wendy’s concerned voice asks him what’s wrong. When he makes it to the door, his arms thrust it open so hard that it bangs violently against the soda machine outside, effectively silencing the entire room, and when he clears the porch, he takes off running. His legs take over, his mind shutting down as his dirty sneakers pound into the ground, thick tree trunks beginning to blur by him.

After three years of just barely outrunning it, three years of ignoring the ominous way it loomed over his shoulder, breathed sickeningly down the back of his neck, three years of fighting it with *every last* drop of will in his body, that dark pit of despair finally catches up to him. And Dipper is too weak, too tired, too broken down to stop it from mercilessly filling up each and every part of him, from swallowing him whole.

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Incredibly enough, he managed to delay the oncoming storm during his furious sprint through the trees. Angrily blinked the tears away out of nothing but sheer willpower. But Dipper's feet don't stop, *won't* stop until they're standing at the edge of where it all started, the old overgrown clearing still and silent as ever. This place is at least a couple of miles out into the woods, and the resulting stitch in his side force the boy into a hunch, dripping with sweat, one hand on his knee and the other clutching at his chest as he wheezes for air. When he finally catches his breath, Dipper slowly straightens back up, giving the area a once-over with dead eyes. How many times he's been back here in the last few years, he doesn't know, but he does know that this is the first time he's come with no intent of any kind of search.

There's no point anymore. She's not here.

She's not anywhere.

His hands feel heavy. He stuffs them into his pockets, lifting his knees to start making his way through the long grass. The muggy summer air bears down on the defeated teenager like a blanketing weight. When he reaches the spot where he found the yellow kite, Dipper lowers himself down to sit back against the nearby fallen tree trunk, his head falling roughly against the rotting wood as he lets his body go limp. He doesn't feel any pain, though. Right now he doesn't feel anything at all. He's just... numb.

Faint, faraway thoughts float into the blank white expanse that's currently his mindscape, getting closer and closer until they start to nibble cruelly at his psyche. He starts to wonder how long his parents, Stan, Wendy—hell, *everyone*—have secretly thought that his undying fixation on finding his lost sister was just the sad result of a kid who didn't want to accept the reality of a terrible situation. He wonders how long they've all been secretly looking at him with that downcast, sympathetic look of pity he always refused to acknowledge.

He knows that his parents, especially his mother, will never be able to completely extinguish that tiny hope that maybe, just *maybe*, Mabel might come back one day, defeating all the odds, all the depressing statistics about children who go missing for longer than 72 hours. Even so, just because that hope is there stewing on the back burner, doesn't mean they actually believe in it. Deep down, Dipper knows they don't... not really. It's the reason the vast majority of their family portraits have been put away at home, because his mom couldn't take

looking at them without breaking down. It's the reason his dad puts in such long hours at the office of his own free will.

But he was different. He *did* believe. God. He believed he'd see Mabel again one day so hard that he'd basically dedicated his entire life to making it happen. And... well, look where the fuck that got him.

Dipper starts to rip the grass around him out of the ground with violent, mechanical motions, fistful after fistful after fistful, glaring vacantly out into the clearing with burning eyes. It feels like there's a boulder caught in his throat rather than a lump.

It's coming. There's no stopping it now that he's let it in. He can feel it rising up in his chest, and he's not ready for it. He never was.

He takes in a ragged gulp of stagnant air, blinking rapidly. Still stubbornly attempting to fight it, feebly stalling the inevitable. The last of his denial floats away from him, far out of reach, leaving him in a topsy turvy, almost drunken state of heartache. Picturing her face really isn't helping, but he can't help it. He let this build up too long, and it's snowballed out of control.

He thinks about how he used to imagine the day Mabel would come back. After so many years of daydreaming about it, he'd mastered the ability to play the day out so clearly, almost like a recording in his head. He'd call out her name, and finally, *finally* she'd answer... He would race towards the sound of her voice, ruthlessly fighting through whatever obstacle—supernatural or human or otherwise—that dared to stand between them. Afterwards his sister would be standing there, so close, right in front of him, and for a second they'd just stare at each other. And then she would be in his arms, safe and warm and in one piece, and they'd both be crying as she whispers in his ear that she knew he would find her, she knew it all this time.

At some point over the years Dipper had sort of accidentally begun to add on an additional part to the daydream. One where after their embrace, he'd take her face in his hands and kiss her, and she would let him.

He used to feel so guilty about that part, abruptly cutting himself off there, proceeding to berate himself for indulging in his sick and, considering the circumstances, very inappropriate fantasies. Ultimately pushing it all down deep enough within himself so he wouldn't have to try and make sense of it.

But now? Whatever, man. Fuck it. He doesn't really care that he ever had those kinds of thoughts about Mabel. Seriously, who cares if he sometimes imagined what kissing her would be like? It doesn't matter either way, because he's never going to do it. Sister or not, you can't kiss someone who's gone and never coming back. You can't kiss someone who's...

Who is, in all likelihood...

Dipper swallows hard, finding himself with no more grass within reaching distance for him to rip up.

...Dead.

The first sob hits him like a blow to the chest, tearing through him so powerfully that he's forced to double over, his knees digging into his forehead, his hands clutching the back of his head. He makes one last pathetic attempt to stop it, but he is far, far past the point of being able to hold anything off any longer, so after the first the second is quick to follow, and soon thick, hot tears are pouring down his sweaty cheeks, his entire body heaving and jerking and shaking; the sounds of his broken inhales and grief-stricken cries fill up the little clearing, reverberating through the trees.

He's an idiot. He's such an idiot. The last three years of his life have been a fucking joke. Of course she's dead. She's probably been dead for a long time now and he was the only person naïve enough to believe otherwise, stubborn enough to keep looking.

"Mabel... M-Mabel... *May—hhh—b-bel... ghh...!*" When he's not gasping for air he's sobbing her name into his knees, repeating it like a mantra, curling and uncurling his fists into his hair.

It's not fair. It's not—*fucking—fair!*

He wasn't supposed to lose her, the only one who'd been with him since the very beginning. He was never supposed to be an only child. His last words to his twin weren't supposed to be some harsh, unwarranted demand to leave him alone. *Ha*, well he sure is alone now. Dipper almost laughs outright at the thought of his younger self, how he'd once had the nerve to complain about how Mabel was always *there*. Instead his face crumbles anew, more broken sobs pouring from his mouth in a loop of apologies.

“I’m *suhh*—I’m s-so *sorry* Mabel... I’m sorry I’m sorry I-I’m so so *sorry*...”

God, he hates himself. So much. He’s nothing but a failure, a lonely, idiotic failure, but Mabel... *Mabel* was so naturally joyful, and *kind*, and hilarious and creative and so many things Dipper isn’t and never will be. She was supposed to grow up, she was supposed to keep being her weird, goofy, amazing self all the way up to until she made it to being that kooky ninety-nine-year-old grandmother who still used glue and googly-eyes on the regular and sent her relatives hand-knitted mittens on their birthdays. She was supposed to live. She was supposed to *live*.

“No,” he wails, unable to stop repeating it once he starts, droplets dripping from his chin, his nose, his hands. “No, no, no, no, no, no...”

Why her? Why did it have to be her?

Shattered, Dipper slowly falls on his side in the dirt, head bowed, knees tucked into his chest, hands clutching his forehead... still desperately and purely wanting nothing more than his sister back, still crying because it’s finally clear to him that that’s never going to happen.

## Part 14

It's a long time before he lets up.

But at a certain point he just runs out of the energy needed to keep up the tears. Emotionally spent, Dipper emits one last shuddering breath, and the clearing goes back to being silent.

Sprawled out on his back in the long grass, he watches the sun gradually sink beneath the jagged line of pine trees, a few twinkling stars dotting the sky in its wake. A bird flies overhead, and his reddened eyes idly follow its path before he closes them, breathing in deeply and letting it all out in a desolate sigh.

The urge to burst open at the seams is gone. But he sure as hell doesn't feel any better, either. The truth that he's never going to see Mabel again has struck him so hard that he can't move, his limbs drained, his heart crushed, his insides empty. This all-consuming empty feeling is definitely something he's never felt before today. It feels bottomless, like he'll never have energy to do anything ever again. And who knows. Maybe he won't.

The sun disappears, twilight settling in. He's been out here for at least a few hours now. Dad is probably getting worried. Up and disappearing on him like that was pretty insensitive on Dipper's part. Plus it's not like he left things between them on the best of terms when he dramatically stormed out of the Shack.

What an idiot he was, yelling at his dad like that, jumping down his throat when all the guy ever did was care. He was just trying to get him to look at things with a shred of reason. No wonder everyone thinks he's crazy, treats him so delicately. Say the wrong thing around Dipper Pines, get attacked. He was a loose cannon. Still is, but now it's for a very different reason.

*Never going to see her again. Hear her voice. Her laugh. Never again.*

No. Stop. Breathe, kid.

Ugh. He told his dad he *hated* him. Dipper sniffs, wiping the back of his hand under his runny nose. He doesn't hate him, not even a little bit. It's true that

he's got a lot of hatred bottled up, but none of that is for his dad.

*Never again. Never ever ever.*

The purple color of the sky fades to blue, and he shudders out another sigh.

He should get up. He should go back. But the thought of trudging back to the Shack and beginning the sickening process of starting over, of truly learning to live life without Mabel... it makes him want to roll over in the grass, fall asleep, and never wake up. He can see his future so clearly now too, gray and bleak and just *blah*. Soon his parents are going to take him away from here, move him back into that house where he grew up with her, put him back in that school and expect him to get out of bed every morning and care about things like grades and friends and what college he wants to go to... and how is he supposed to do any of that? All that stuff seems so disgustingly trivial, just thinking about it leaves a bad taste on his tongue.

Is he just supposed to *ignore* this giant, gaping wound in his chest? That seems impossible. Is that really what people do in these fucked up situations? Go through the motions and just hope that at some point the pain will dull and the hole will close up, nothing left of them but a long, gnarled stretch of scar tissue?

And... what if it does heal? What if he does go through the motions enough until one day, Mabel is nothing but a face in a dusty picture frame. His stomach lurches, he can see it so vividly. People will pick up the frame and ask who she is. And he'll reply, gray in his hair, a sad smile on his face. *I used to have a sister. But she disappeared when we were thirteen. Never found.* Whoever asked will backtrack, shower him with apologies and condolences. *It's okay. Don't worry about it. Happened a long time ago.*

*It's okay.*

Dipper's eyes prickle with fresh tears. No, oh god, no. That seems so much worse. He doesn't want to forget. He doesn't want to be okay. He doesn't want to be okay ever again.

The silent tears begin to leak out of him, and Dipper throws a shaky arm over his face as it distorts into a mournful grimace, his brows furrowing as far as they'll go. Every time he thinks he's done, the cycle starts up all over again. At this rate he really will be laying here forever. Which doesn't seem like the worst

fate, considering the miserable future that's waiting for him back home... well, not *home* home. It doesn't even feel like he has a home anymore. Home was where his sister was, and he doesn't have a sister anymore.

But then he thinks of Dad, who's probably pacing a hole into the floor with worry back at the Shack, maybe even calling Mom...

In the end, that's what makes Dipper lug his body up into a sitting position. As inviting as lying here forever sounds, he can't put his parents through any of that. Not again. They wouldn't be able to survive it a second time.

Picking his cap off the ground, he hooks it back onto his head, then cracks his wrists and back. His breakdown left him drained and weak. Everything hurts, his head pounding, his throat raw, his eyes puffy and red. He doesn't even bother to wipe the tearstains from his face, since the way things are going now, more will be coming soon anyway. Why bother?

He teeters to his feet, one wobbly leg at a time. The last of the light is fading fast, but Dipper feels none of the apprehension he'd normally get from the prospect of a nighttime trek through the woods without a flashlight or even the light of his phone to guide him. He's got a gnarly headache, and the faster he gets home and reassures his family he's not dead or missing, the sooner he can collapse into bed and sleep for a few days. All he wants to do is sleep.

His headache causes a loud buzzing in his ears, and as Dipper shuffles back across the dark meadow, he realizes that that's *all* he hears. Seriously, what is with this place? Shouldn't there be some sort of like... nighttime sounds? Crickets chirping, or something?

A shiver runs down his spine, and not because of the chilly night air that's just set in. Dipper always did get bad vibes from this place, but he mostly chalked it up to the fact that it was where he'd found the kite, since he could only conclude that something bad had happened here. But it's almost as if the place *itself* is what's truly bothersome. It's hard to put a finger on it, but the air here just feels too quiet to be normal.

Movement enters his peripherals, and he looks down just in time for an animal (rabbit, maybe?) to scurry across his path. It's the only living creature he's seen come through here probably ever, so Dipper watches with vacant interest as it darts into an especially long patch of grass off to his left. There's a



sharp rustling, and then... nothing. Dipper keeps perfectly still, suddenly wrapped up in waiting for the rabbit to reappear, or at least rustle some grass again. But it doesn't. Once again, there's nothing to listen to but the ringing in his ears.

The part of him that can't help but investigate every little abnormal thing stirs, and he finds his feet moving steadily in the direction of where he last saw the rabbit. Between his bleary eyes and the night, it's really hard to see, and he doesn't know what he expects to find anyway. But like a zombie he keeps moving forward, irrationally focused on this one little thing, if only because blindly following some woodland creature around in the dark has nothing to do with grief or pain or owning up to your problems.

It still hasn't come out. What, did it hop in there and die? Dipper squints into the darkness, taking another step, but the grass he steps on gives way to nothing, and suddenly his balance is gone.

*“Woah—!”*

His arms flail in the air, and he manages to lunge his weight backwards at the last second to land on his butt. Breathing hard, he rolls over and scrabbles forward on his hands and knees, his hands pushing through the grass and feeling along the dirt.

Well no wonder the rabbit never came out. This isn't a patch of grass at all.

It's a hole.

He frowns, his eyes widening, feeling a strong desire to smack himself. He's been to this creepy clearing loads of times—how the hell did he miss this? Although the thing *is* kind of an anomaly. The grass grows inwards around it, concealing the vast majority of the entrance, almost as if it's trying to hide it away. And the area is so inconspicuous, nothing to differentiate it from any other longer patch of grass in this clearing... you'd never know there was anything here until you were already standing right over it.

Or... falling into it.

Immediately the gears in his brain click into place and start to turn furiously, his heartbeat picking up right along with it.

A gaping hole he's never seen before. In the place where he found her kite. It can't be a coincidence.

The revelation has that burning hope that had been snuffed out only hours ago flickering back to life. At first he doesn't know what to do with himself, still on his hands and knees, his eyes wide, jumpy fingers digging into the dirt. Then he springs into action, unable to stop himself from lowering in his head with trembling arms and yelling her name, waiting, listening.

No answer.

This doesn't deter him, though. Most people probably wouldn't put much hope into stumbling upon an ominous-looking pit three years after the fact, but Dipper's brain is jumping at the chance to form plausible scenarios. Okay. Okay. Even if she never got out, if there was something supernatural down there to greet her, she might still be alive. There's a chance. However slim.

He doesn't hesitate to snatch it up and hang onto it for dear life.

Frantically circling around to push aside the rest of the grass, he eyeballs the size of it, estimating its diameter. His hand closes around a rock near his feet, and he holds it over the edge for a few seconds before letting it drop. The sound of impact comes only a moment later. Something could definitely be living down there.

Holes. What does he know about holes like this in Gravity Falls?

*Think, Dipper.*

Out of nowhere Old Man McGucket's voice pops into his head, yelling, "*I bee-lieve it had legs like a spider. And great big claws!*"

Dipper jerks away from the hole, sitting back on his haunches, his eyes alight with the answer he was looking for.

Holes. Mole people. His mind continues to whirl. *Molepeople-molepeople-molepeople...* possibly hostile... hidden hole, gaping chasm... supposedly only one entrance to their burrow... one that he never found. But why hadn't he—

Dipper's face falls. That's right. His hunt for the entrance had been cut short.

Long buried memories of Trent Houghton and balled up maps and police cars flit through his head. Ugh. People around town hadn't looked at him quite the same after that. He'd gotten a year of probation, spent a collective 30-hours cleaning up the park, and hasn't picked up a shovel since.

His stomach turns. There's a sharp pang in his chest. *Fucking...* if he hadn't given up then, would Mabel be back right now?

He swallows hard and tries to shake it off. No... no. Can't think that way. No point. He's gotta be smart about this, since there's no way to tell for sure *what* he'll find down there. If he even finds anything at all. And if he does find something... there's always the chance that he might not like what he sees.

Mabel's face slips through the cracks of his thought process, smiling at him, asking if he's ready to go hang out and fly their kites.

Jumping up from his spot on the ground, Dipper stands to his full height, features resolute. He cups his palms to his face, dragging them apart along his eyelids and cheeks, wiping away the grogginess and the stickiness from hours of crying in one clean sweep.

There's no question of whether or not he's going down there. Tonight. A plan is already piecing itself together in his head, but he's going to need supplies.

Energy he didn't know he possessed courses through him as he turns on the balls of his feet and begins the run back to the Shack, clinging to that tiny flicker of hope with every last fiber of his being.

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He'd arrived back in record time, right away getting bogged down with a '*you can't just run off like that without telling anyone where you're going*' spiel from his father—but the entire speech was drowned out by Dipper's mind speedily pulling together a list of things he should pack, where those things might be found. Rope's in the shed. He'll need something to hammer into the ground to use as an anchor for a makeshift rappel, since the tree trunks were too far to be usable. And on that note, pack a hammer. Grunkle Stan's got a flare gun hidden somewhere in his office, that could be useful. And possibly... Mabel's grappling hook? Yeah, couldn't hurt. He'd used it for something about a year ago, but where had he put it?

It was then that Dad's speech concluded with a firm, "*Do you understand me,*" jostling Dipper back into his body. There was a moment where he'd looked into his dad's troubled eyes, and actually contemplated telling him where he was going, letting him in on his discovery. The sentiment was gone as quick as it came. He couldn't have anything hindering his plans, and there was no way his father would ever approve of him charging down some random hole in the ground by moonlight. Especially after knowing what his son's real intent was, considering all the words that had been exchanged between them today. Dipper's plan would immediately be pigeonholed as some dangerously insane form of denial. Which, it *wasn't*.

So, he bit his tongue, responding with nothing but a convincingly submissive, "Yes, sir." Then he surreptitiously gathered his supplies, snuck out one of the side doors of the Shack, and did exactly what he'd just promised his dad he wouldn't do, that same little flicker still burning away inside him, threatening to spark into a full blown fire.

Now he stands back at the mouth of the hole, full knapsack on his back, metal baseball bat in hand (you never know), coil of rope slung over one shoulder. Shining a flashlight down into its hollow depths, Dipper tries with all his might not to think about how terrified he is... of what he might run into down there, of what he'll see, of what he won't see. If he squints hard enough, he thinks he can make out the bottom. Maybe. He throws down a few more rocks of varying sizes, flings down the length of his rope. It looks to be about a two-story drop, a little more than that at most. Definitely possible for a person to survive that fall, depending what they landed on.

He has no real idea of what he's getting himself into, and admittedly a part of him really, really doesn't want to do this. Brazenly going down alone into a suspicious crevice in the earth? Not really the smartest thing a person could do.

But he could never forgive himself if he didn't follow through. *Can't be a coincidence*, he thinks again. One last lead. One last leap of faith. And if it doesn't pan out then... then... he'll cross that bridge when he comes to it. He spent more than enough of today in that dark, hopeless place. He doesn't want to think about the distinct possibility that he might have to go back to it.

Okay. Time for him to venture into a different sort of dark place; no more dawdling, and no wimping out.

Dipper taps the improvised anchor he'd found in the shed into the dirt, the clinks of the hammer on the metal resonating crystal clear throughout the vacant clearing. Utilizing his reliable ol' scout knowledge, he knots the middle of the rope to the jutting metal, threads one end of it through the straps of his backpack, then uses two hands to lower the whole pack, baseball bat jutting out through the zipper, into the depths. When he feels it meet the bottom, he yanks the rope back up, making sure both rope lengths are evenly aligned before letting them fall back into the shadows. He swallows hard, because now, it's his turn. Carefully, Dipper prepares the rope for safely supporting his body, looping it through his legs, around his thigh, across his torso and shoulder, down his back and arm. Shoving the flashlight between his teeth, he shuffles backwards until his trainers rest at the very edge, seriously regretting it when he twists around to take in the murky blackness over his shoulder. His heart gives an anxious jolt.

This plan is probably crazy. Probably more than crazy. Dipper sets his jaw, turning around to glare back into the night. He can do this. He *will* do this. For Mabel. He's certainly done crazier.

Without allowing time for anymore thoughts of backing out, Dipper begins lowering himself into the hole. Sweat beads on his brow, his arms shaking from the strain. Sheesh. If he makes it out of here one piece, he really needs to break down and work out more. He keeps his eyes on the rope, watching it swap between inching through his fingers frighteningly fast, and at a snail's pace as he jerkily fumbles his way down. At about ten feet down he peeks up at the sky, that biting, uneasy feeling getting stronger as his glimpse of the full moon gets further and further away.

When his feet suddenly meet level ground, he flinches, not expecting it so soon. Well. That turned out to be a lot less painful than he thought it'd be. Mildly aching biceps aside.

The first thing that strikes him is that without the wind drifting past his ears, it's even more chillingly silent down here than it was up there. A shiver runs down the length of his spine, but the Dipper tries in vain to chalk it up to his typical amount of paranoia. As he shines his flashlight around to assess his surroundings, he senses no movement, sees nothing along the towering walls of dirt but a wide, slanting tunnel on one side.

There is something disconcerting about the damp, moss-covered floor when

he takes a closer look: dead animal bones, and a fair amount of them. They're littered here and there, mostly remains of smaller animals like squirrels and rabbits. A few larger ones that could've belonged to a beaver or badger or something, but nothing bigger than that. He breathes out a sigh of relief he hadn't realized he'd been holding in.

Dipper swivels around to stare down the mouth of the looming cave ahead, flashlight in one hand, bat gripped tight in the other, and knapsack returned to its place snug on his back. His nose is running a little, and he sniffs softly, adjusting the hat on his head. Nowhere to go but forward, so without further delay he does, taking long, solid strides, armoring himself against the fear and apprehension in his belly with the shimmering hope in his heart.

Tiny crystals radiating a soft green light soon begin to appear around him, popping up more and more frequently as the path continues to slope downwards the further he walks. Old Man McGucket's description of mole people now plays on repeat in his head, along with the book's. *Possibly hostile*, it'd said. Possibly didn't mean definitely... the author didn't really seem to know much about these creatures at all, when it came down to it. And '*legs like a spider?*' If they have spider bodies, then where does the mole part come in?

But the real question is, are they going to be manotaur-mermaid-handwitch friendly, or gigantic talking island-head-thing lethal? Hopefully nearer the vicinity of the former, since he's praying that they turned out to be Mabel's savior... somehow. But there are a lot of holes in his theory, just like there'd been in many of the others he's had over the years. Like if they *did* take her in, why wouldn't they let her leave? Or did she choose to stay? And why? He tries not to think about it, just keeps his feet moving forward.

Dipper almost drops the flashlight when he catches slight movement out of the corner of his eye. He practically pirouettes in a circle, skittishly raking the beam of light over the tunnel walls. There's nothing there. His hands become damp with nervous sweat. Did he actually see something, or is this just paranoia doing cruel things to his imagination?

His question is answered when two giant shapes suddenly leap down from above his head, landing a few feet in front of him, blocking his path; this time Dipper does lose his grip on the flashlight as a petrified shout bursts from his lungs, and he stumbles backwards, almost tripping over a rock in the process.

For an odd second the alarm is replaced by another overwhelming urge to smack himself across the face. The ceiling, idiot! Never forget to check the ceiling!

The numerous questions he had about molepeoples' appearances fade away as boy and creatures become locked in a stagnant pause, scoping each other out. They're not out-of-this-world tall, but they look huge next to the sixteen-year-old, who's still sort of lacking in height even after his most recent growth spurt. Their expressions prove hard to read, the twelve grayish eyes shared between them unblinking, their snouts innocuously sniffing at the moist air. Tattered old button-ups cover their human-like torsos, thick paws held at bay, spidery legs unmoving. One of them is much stockier than the other.

Dipper's heart whirs, his bewildered gaze flicking back and forth between these two wildcard creatures. Alright, they're freaky looking and intimidating as hell. But are these guys gonna end up as friends or foes?

One of them speaks up, answering the question of whether they understand English or not. "Well lookee 'ere, brother. Seems we won't even have to break the surface t'hunt today, our kill's come a'wanderin' in all on its own."

Laughter breaks out between them, an uneven, wheezing sound that makes Dipper's blood run icy cold as all the color drains from his face.

Uh, foe. Definitely foe.

The crippling sinking of Dipper's heart is quickly curbed by survival mode, his mind voting down fight in favor of flight. Luckily he'd never dropped the bat, which he swiftly raises in the air, slowly beginning a careful retreat. "Stay back," he warns in the most menacing growl he can muster. But if it was even at all the least bit menacing, the tremor in his voice ruins the effect. He can feel his limbs starting to tremble, already well aware this isn't going to end well as those *things* continue to advance on him, like hunters closing in on prey.

When they finally swoop in, the smaller one plucks the bat out of his hands like it's a flower petal rather than metal caught in the tightest grip he could manage, chucking it thirty clean feet down the passageway. The other rips the bag from his back before Dipper can even blink, throwing the straps around a broad, hairy shoulder, then grabbing the petrified boy around the middle with two lethal-looking paws, effortlessly lifting him into the air.

“Let—me—go—” is all Dipper can think to sputter out, futilely twisting and kicking as the thing hefts him over its shoulder and whistles for its partner. He screams out some of his more colorful curses, but they ignore him, talk right over him even as they begin to quickly descend into the sloping tunnel.

“Let’s get ‘im to the choppin’ block. People’re gonna lose’re shit over a human, I’m seein’ some good n’ fat pockets in our future.”

“Mmm. Bet we could get a fine offer from ol’ Rhurkiv, he’s always pays real well for good spleen...”

Dipper doesn’t know what makes him feel more nauseated, the way his body is harshly bouncing up and down on this thing’s back as it moves, or the horrifying things they’re saying. There’s gotta be a way out of this. There’s always been a way out. But—but—*dammit*, his mind is blanking! They’re racing so fast down the tunnel, and his intuition is telling him that if they reach the end of it, it’ll be all over. This thing is squeezing him so tightly that he can barely move, how is he supposed to—*wait*. There’s a knife in his pocket, a simple old swiss army knife he carries around with him at all times. It’s small and won’t do any real damage to these things, but it might be enough to buy him some time for a hasty exit.

Worth a shot.

Dipper’s arms are pinned to his sides in the spider-mole-creature’s unyielding hold, so it’s difficult to even move one of them enough to reach into his pocket. Nothing greets his hand at first, his anxiety through the roof when for a second he thinks he may have dropped his knife somewhere back in the tunnel—and then the tips of his fingers graze metal.

*C’mon, c’mon... just grab it already!* His hand scrabbles around in his pocket for a few more heart pounding seconds before he finally feels his fingers close around a metal handle, thumb blindly flipping out the blade.

Breaking his arm away with one forceful yank, he manages to bring his hand around to jab the small knife deep into the creature’s hairy, gargantuan back; it yowls in pain, releasing its grip on Dipper, and with a short yelp the panicking teenager comes crashing to the ground. Determined to take full advantage of what’s probably his last chance at escaping, he quickly rolls back onto his feet, gritting his teeth when pain explodes in his right knee. Pure adrenaline enables



him to ignore the pain and initiate a sprint in the other direction, but he barely gets three full strides in before something hooks onto the collar of his vest, the jolt backwards causing him to end up right back in the dirt. Shit.

A dusty cough escapes Dipper's throat as he lies flat on his back, the sudden contact of solid earth on the back of his head temporarily winding him. There are still stars blinking around in his eyes when he tries to lunge to his feet again—only to have a long, spidery leg step hard on his stomach, pinning him to the ground.

“Ah—!” Now the fear is really starting to set in and Dipper struggles wildly, yelling out more jumbled curses, his limbs flailing and punching at the hairy appendage that's got him trapped. His struggling is quickly put to an end when another one of the creature's legs suddenly digs roughly into his throat, causing him to give off a loud hack before falling deathly silent.

His vision is already spotting as Dipper helplessly watches the two giant things loom over him. He tries futilely to take in air. His limbs start to twitch.

“This here's mighty feisty one, Kurvt,” one of them mutters through that thick southern accent they both harbor. “Still reckon we should bring ‘im back in one piece?”

The other seems to ponder this for a second before Dipper can see the creature shaking its head in the darkness. “Ain't worth givin' up the cut we'll get for bringin' back a live one. Nearly there, anyway.”

The hairy foot lifts off his neck and Dipper immediately gasps in air so hard that his lungs want to implode, his face a dangerous shade of purple. He feels himself being lifted up into the air once again and hauled onto the creature's shoulder, his wavering limbs too stricken to fight anymore, his hat fluttering to the ground. A sense of what could only be described as utter doom encases his entire body as he's carried deeper down the tunnel, powerless to do anything to stop it.

All the hope he felt on his way down here drains away, leaving him feeling emptier than ever. He takes it all back. Please, please, don't let this godforsaken hole be the place Mabel ended up all those years ago. Because if it was, it's now crystal clear to him why she never came out.

Images of Mabel's bloody, broken body flash through his mind and a sick feeling overtakes his stomach, his chest jerking, a bit of bile heaving out of his slackening mouth as Dipper finally gives in to the oncoming darkness.

## Part 15

Mama tightens the knot of the scarf beneath Mabel's chin again. Her brown eyes stay fixed on her Mama's face while the woman goes through the routine speech of the teen girl's expected behavior. Mabel watches the lines of annoyance twist into Mama's face, as it always did whenever they went to the marketplace. The molewoman sighs, patting Mabel's head before quickly readjusting the fancy shawl Mabel knitted up for her that's now wrapped around her head and shoulders.

"Come now, Child. We ain't got all day ya know."

A giant, cold paw encircles her hand and Mabel quickly tightens the grip as they stroll out of the darkness of the tunnel entryway into the bright yellow of the town hall. Mabel squints under the light, her eyes burning as she tucks her head away from the shining crystals lining every inch of dirt.

They push through the crowd of shoppers. Mama practically pulls Mabel's arm out of her socket, mumbling under her breath about the light or the people or her shopping list or something. Mabel's not really sure, too busy struggling to keep up with Mama's pace to really try to listen. As usual, the first stop is at the herbs and home remedies cart. The mole woman manning the station forces a smile on her face when she spots the odd pair approaching.

"Why, cheery day we're havin' today, ain't it, Svooth?"

"Yes, yes," Svooth smiles, her voice filled with anything but cheer. "Do you have my shipment today, or what Karst? A lady don't keep people waitin' ya know."

"Oh right. Of course. Of course..."

The saleswoman scrambles around through her supplies, making Svooth groan in annoyance. As the two discuss prices, Mabel dares to look around at the carts and molepeople roaming about her. Her eyes meet with a teenaged mole boy, his six tiny eyes barely visible beneath his hair and hood as he smirks at her. Her hand comes up on its own accord, fingers poised as if she was about to wave. A strange instinct really. It's not like she actually expects him be

friendly... And to no surprise at all he snarls, nose wrinkling as his tongue slips out of his furry lips to wag suggestively at her.

*Yuck.*

Her stomach knots up, color draining from her face as she turns to the protective shield of Mama's arms only to find the mole woman missing. A panic floods her system, her hands trembling as she whirls around in a daze.

"Mama?"

"Child, stop dilly daddling," Mama shouts, a few cart stands away, waving Mabel down. The girl quickly runs to her side, hands grabbing hold of Svooth's dress, fingers clinging onto the knitted fabric as they stroll to the next stand of goods. She ignores the bustle around her, instead choosing to focus on calming her rapidly beating heart, as well as on the worn fabric tight in her grip, the grip that meant safety.

She's used to receiving looks from pretty much everyone they pass when her and Mama go out and about like this. Comparably tiny human girls kind of stick out like a sore thumb around here. But just because she's used to it, doesn't mean she's any more comfortable with it now than the first time it happened, when the Mayor's beady eyes had raked over her from head to toe and her skin had broken out into almost painful goose bumps all over.

She makes a subtle attempt to keep hiding her face in Mama's skirt as the nonsense woman forcefully bargains with a vendor for a square of brownish green fabric, but soon that familiar paw is batting her away and forcing her to take a step back. "Good grief babydoll, get ahold of ya'self," comes the stern voice above her head. "We're in public, d'you want to get folks thinkin' I raised some sort of namby-pamby?"

The vague thought of what the heck a namby-pamby could be flitters through Mabel's mind as she shakes her head vigorously back and forth, one of her hands timidly rubbing her arm. "No, Mama."

For that Svooth awards Mabel one hard pat on the head and a, "That's more like it," before she turns to finish bartering with a particularly skittish-looking female, determined on having it her way, as usual. The teenaged girl next to her passes the time by switching between picking at the grime wedged under her

bitten-off fingernails, and wiggling her bare toes in the dirt that coats the cave floor of the marketplace. Eventually Mama beckons Mabel onwards again, stuffing the square of barf-colored fabric into the wicker basket hanging from her arm.

They begin to make their way through the crowd again, Svooth's legs skittering forward while Mabel robotically follows, a handful of skirt once again clutched between her fingers. When the two of them pass by the especially large stand that specializes in selling... bloody meat stuff, Mabel concentrates on keeping her eyes trained ahead of her and breathing exclusively through her mouth, knowing from past experience that if she sees or smells any of the horrible things happening at that particular booth, her gag reflex can and *will* kick in.

She shudders at the memory of the first time she'd been to the market for her big 'debut' and unsuspectingly approached the area where all the butcher-y things were sold. Mama had almost wrenched her arm out of her socket while dragging her back to their burrow after she'd thrown up in the middle of the street, ranting furiously about how she *knew* this was a mistake, she *knew* her baby wasn't ready to handle being out... Mabel hadn't been allowed to leave their home again for what seemed like *forever* after that, turning what to do in this situation into a quick lesson.

*Don't look at the blood, don't smell the guts. Eugck.*

"Oh, I dunno," Mabel overhears a patron as she and Mama pass by, "don't ya have anything more fresh?"

"It is fresh. Caught 'em this here very morning."

"Looks purty dead ta me."

"Well I reckon..."

The vendor's voice blurs into the jumbled noise of the marketplace. Mabel pretends she didn't hear any of it, teeth digging into her lip as her and Mama press on through the crowd.

"Jus' need one more thing, honey-lamb," Svooth says as they finally stop a few booths down. "Then we'll be headed on home and you can start werkin' on a

nice new bonnet for ya Mama.”

Mabel nods on reflex, sighing and going back to the exciting task of watching her toes wriggle around in the filth. The prospect of returning home after the market always leaves her with a partially torn feeling. On one hand, it'll be a relief to duck out of this place where people look at her like a tasty treat (in multiple ways, she thinks, making a grossed out face); on the other hand, well... it gets stuffy there, being in that burrow, all day, all the time... she really would like to be able to enjoy the times she can get out more. Plus the tips of her fingers are aching from all the knitting Svooth has been having her do lately, and she's not looking forward to having to pick up her needles as soon as they step through the door. Sheesh, it's like Mama thinks she needs a completely new wardrobe every so often to keep up appearances with the mayor... why does she want that creep around all the time, anyway?

Mabel has just switched to drawing smiley faces into the dirt with her foot when someone roughly shoulders past her in their rush to get by, bumping her with enough force to send her to her hands and knees. A second later she's being pulled back to her feet by her upper arm, and Svooth is hissing angrily after the more careless than usual passerby. “Ya'll watch it now!” She yells before turning back to her purchase.

Meanwhile Mabel, now with two fists full of Mama's dress, watches quite a curious sight unfold before her. The moleperson who'd knocked her down apparently wasn't the only one in a hurry, because there's a steady stream of skittering spider legs headed back in the direction from which they'd just came, a lot of loud shouting and—Mabel rises up on her tiptoes, craning her neck—a crowd forming around the meat vendor.

Oh.

Mabel's tummy churns and she lowers herself back down.

She's seen this before, unfortunately. Sometimes when scavengers bring back stuff that's—she shudders—still *alive*, the crowd riles itself into a frenzy, everyone trying to get a piece of the fresh pickin's. Last time it was a deer, gutted, picked apart and sold in what seemed like only a matter of minutes. Her face tinges a bit green. Whatever had been unfortunate enough to get caught by the scavengers wasn't going to last much longer now. Poor thing.

But there's nothing she can do for it, so there's no use dwelling on it. She turns away from the sight, the roar of the crowd growing louder as she weakly kicks earth over her former smiley face drawing, erasing it from view.

She's about to ask Mama if they can leave, when she hears it.

Mabel's head jerks up so fast that pain shoots through her neck. She whirls back around towards the growing ruckus, her eyes wide, her ears trained, her mind frantically trying to figure out whether or not she'd just imagined it.

And—there it is again. A scream, so piercing it's managed to rise above the clamor of the enclosing mob. Now she's a hundred-percent sure she heard it, because this time it doesn't stop. Whatever's about to be violently divided amongst the people is most definitely still alive.

The hair on the back of her neck prickles, her heart thrums in her chest. It doesn't sound like a deer or a rabbit or a raccoon. This scream sounds genuinely terrified, and frantic and alert and... and... familiar?

Something covered in cobwebs, something long, long dormant, stirs in the very back of her mind.

No. It's—there's no way—*no*.

Mabel bites down hard on the inside of her cheek.

Never... never ever *ever*... has she left Mama's side of her own free will here in the market. Not once. Truthfully, the thought of what she's about to do terrifies her almost as much as the shrieks that are still tearing relentlessly though her ears. But she has to do it. She has to see for herself, she has to prove herself wrong right *now* or she knows she'll be dwelling on this for the rest of forever.

Gulping in an unstable breath, her only other hesitation is a wide eyed glance up at the back of Mama's head before she's resolutely throwing down the fistfuls of skirt and twisting on the balls of her feet, darting away from safety, foregoing all her usual instincts for a newer and much more powerful one. She dives recklessly into the throng of predatory shoppers, ignoring the furious calls that trail behind her with all her might.

“Babydoll?! What in tarnation—you come back here this minute! *Babydoll!*”

Soon Mama’s voice is no longer audible, and Mabel can concentrate fully on weaving her way through the swarm, ducking under shifty legs and squeezing through hairy bodies, focused on absolutely nothing but getting to where she knows she needs to go. The alarmed yells have gotten close enough now that she can hear words in between them (“*Let me go, you fucking—no, stop—!*”), which only prompts her feet to move faster.

Someone grabs a handful of her chin-length hair and rather than cowering in fear and yelling for Mama she finds herself ruthlessly flinging her leg back with a resounding “*kee-yahh!*” Her foot makes a direct connection with her target, causing her unknown assailant to let go, and she quickly pushes forward again like nothing had happened. It’s almost as if a new Mabel has taken over her body, one who is willful and brave and fearless—or is that the old Mabel? She doesn’t know, and right now she doesn’t care, because miraculously she’s almost made her way to the front of the pushing crowd, the smell of death invading her nose once again and through the few remaining crammed together bodies she can *almost* spot that horrible, vomiting-inducing stall...

Move! Dangit, *move* you dumb jerkwards!

The yells for help become mixed in with the sounds of a stomach-turning bidding war as she shoves her way up to the last line of bodies standing in between her and her goal. Nobody notices her small body jammed down in between everyone else since they’re all focused on what she’s seconds away from seeing for herself.

“Give ya ten fer the liver and five fer th’gut sack!”

“I’m offerin’ fifteen fer the liver!”

“Twenty!”

“Dammit, just kill it already! Damn thing’s louder’n kingdom come!”

Shaking all over, Mabel cranes her neck to peek between the many legs of a rather large male standing tall like a barrier in front of her, and—

Her heart leaps high into her throat.



Thrashing around on top of the wooden table at the meat traders', a table that's been permanently stained a dark, damp red, is a boy.

*A human boy.*

A human boy with curly brown hair and gangly limbs who at first glance she barely recognizes, but then suddenly becomes more familiar to her than she can bear.

Mabel sways on her feet. The noise of the roaring mob fades away, the distance between her and the table stretching out infinitely, a deafening ringing sound in her ears. She wants to scream and laugh and throw up all at the same time.

Is that...?

*It is.*

That's him, right over there. Just a few feet away, right in this very—no. *No*, it—there's no way. She's dreaming, she's delirious, she's been down here too long and has finally gone coo-coo crazy off the deep end, there's no way he could have—

Mabel squeezes her eyes shut so hard they hurt and opens them again a second later. Yup, nope, that's him. His yells and shrieks sound deeper and his round cheeks are sort of missing and he's much bigger than the version of himself that sometimes still haunts her dreams, but no, she's sure of it, that boy over there is truly, unmistakably, unquestionably, one-hundred-percent undeniably...

*Dipper.*

He... he's actually here. He came for her. Well, tried to come for her, at least.

Tears flood her eyes and she snaps back to the present just as the shrieks of the sick auction for her brother's life come to an end.

"Fine, fine, twenty-five it is then. Damn stiff. Hold 'im down, will ya?"

Mabel finally overcomes the spinning in her head long enough to get a solid

grasp on the situation here, the reality of it hitting her like an especially painful ton of bricks.

*O-oh. Oh god.*

“No, wait wait, no wait, *please*—!”

They’ve cut him out of his shirt. He’s yelling, struggling, begging for his life, but no one’s listening, no one cares. There are tears cutting paths down his dirty cheeks, his eyes wide and face twisted up with terror as they bring a jagged knife to his bare belly, ready to do the unthinkable.

After an eternity of attempting to keep them locked away, memories and feelings and thoughts of Dipper go off like an H-bomb in her mind. Out of nowhere, what was once a hopeless daydream has suddenly become reality, and now they’re just going to kill him, before she can even let out a single joyful cry. After so long he’s right *there*, he’s literally *feet* away, and now they’re going to take him away from her, they’re going to slice him open like an animal without a second thought, and—

Tears flow down her face, her small fists clenching.

And—and—*like hell she’s gonna let that happen!*

Before the knife moves a centimeter further Mabel is letting out a determined shriek, wildly slamming her meager amount of weight against the tall moleman in front of her, bursting out of the crowd, sprinting forward, shouting out a desperate, “*Stop! That’s my brother!*”

“Wha’ n’ Sam’s hill...?” the vendor holding Dipper down shouts out, reeling back. Mabel’s body is flung across Dipper’s, her arm’s squeezing the shaking boy tight against her as she glares up at the moleman wielding the knife.

“Ma-Mabel...?” Dipper’s hoarse voice questions. Mabel turns her head, straining to meet her brother’s gaze for the first time in years. Tears continue to steadily stream down her cheeks, the droplets falling onto his chest as she slowly nods her head. His jaw drops further to let out a choked noise that sounds like something between a laugh and a cry, his wide eyes filled with wonder and disbelief, his newly freed arms springing forward and closing tight around her frame. He inhales deep, and she does the same, taking in the vaguely familiar

scent of... of... her brain can't even place it, but it's *Dipper* and that's all that really matters. Their glassy eyes meet again, and he opens his mouth to speak—

“Chop ‘em both!” someone in the crowd hollers, various others roaring out in agreement.

Oh right, a stab away from being someone's dinner here.

“Can we even dice her, Kurvt?” the moleman without the knife whispers nervously. “That's *Svooth's* girl, ya know. The headache may not be worth it.”

The other moleman looks down at them with a dubious expression, twirling the hilt of his blade within his massive claws. He then shrugs, stabbing the knife into the side of the wooden counter and yanking Mabel off her brother by the back of her burlap dress in one swift move. “Outta the way, girl. Ya messin' wit our profits.”

“Unhand my Babydoll right this instant, Kurvt, ya mongrel!” Svooth yells venomously, knocking her way to the front of the crowd.

“Gladly,” he scoffs, tossing Mabel over to Mama like a ragdoll. Mama hisses over Mabel's head, glaring the man down as he easily pulls his blade back out, snorting in Svooth's direction.

She snaps her attention back to Mabel, yanking and pulling on the girl's head as she ties back on the scarf Mabel didn't even realize had fallen off. Mabel gasps, the uproar over Dipper's innards starting up again.

No no no!

She wiggles in her caretaker's grip, struggling to keep the molewoman from walking off.

“Mama—”

The sound of Dipper grappling with the meat vendors claws into Mabel's eardrums.

“Child, have ya gone mad?”

“Mama!”

“Ya can’t just be running off like that, making a spectacle of ya’self. I raised you better than tha...”

“Mama please!” Mabel screams desperately, hot tears rolling down her cheeks, all ten fingers wringing around Mama’s wrist.

“C’mon now, child. We’re goin’ home.”

“*No!*” she roars, swatting out of Svooth’s hold. “You can’t let them—they can *not* kill him! He’s my brother! *Please!*”

Mama stares wide eyed at the gasping, heavy breathing girl in front her, watching every inch of her ward tremble in pure defiance, her little hands clenched so tightly into fists that her knuckles are turning white. And her dark brown eyes... they hold a powerful fire Svooth has never seen before, least not in the last two years or so.

The molewoman blinks and sighs, “*Fine*, child,” her four eyes rolling at the dramatics.

“Kurvt,” she yells over the crowd, stalling the man’s hands right as he’s about pierce into Dipper’s stomach.

“What, woman?”

“Put yer useless lil knife away. I’ll be takin’ the boy, all of him. *Alive.*” She glances down at a thankful Mabel, then back at a stunned Kurvt. “I don’t have all day, Kurvt. Ya know it’s rude to keep a lady waitin’.”

Kurvt cocks his head to the side, snorting in disbelief. “Ya’ll can’t afford no full body.”

“I can afford plenty,” Svooth replies dryly, already digging out a hefty wad of currency from her basket. And if the sheer amount of money wasn’t enough to deter any opposing bidders, Svooth’s death glare was. The disgruntled crowd begins to disperse, Mama laughing haughtily in victory as Kurvt gives his partner the signal to release Dipper. The moleman, obviously irritated at the domineering female and the current lack of blood and guts, decides to take it out

on the teenage boy still trembling on the table, swiping him off the cutting block and sending him crashing to the ground with a dismissive claw.

“Good riddance yeh damn pest, you were weak blood anyway,” Kurvt sneers, delivering a kick to Dipper’s side with one thick, spindly leg before stalking away. Mabel starts forward on instinct, but Mama’s got two firm paws gripping her shoulders. She’s forced to just stand by and watch with a heavy heart as her twin wraps an arm around his middle and exhales a pained grunt into the dirt, then suddenly jerks up and vomits.

“Oh fer land’s sake,” Mama’s disgusted voice rings out harshly from above her head and Mabel bites her lip, unsure of what to do. “Get up boy, I won’t wait for ya all day.” But apparently all Dipper is capable of right now is a blank, wide-eyed stare up at Mama. Mabel feels her caretaker’s annoyed claws dig into her shoulders. “I said *up*, now, ya hear!”

It seems to sink in with him that Svooth means business, and he scrabbles around in the dirt, quickly grabbing for his ruined shirt and vest along with the small brown knapsack, which had gotten tossed aside during the scuffle. When he finally staggers to his feet, all of the color is still missing from his face, his body still shaking with adrenaline and shock and fear, a tiny bit of blood oozing out of the minuscule cut on his stomach from where the knife had grazed him.

For the second time that day Mabel and Dipper’s eyes lock, all words escaping the long separated siblings as they stare at one another in awe. Her heart pounds furiously as she drinks in his image and once again comes to the realization that her brother—who she was *positive* she’d never see again—is standing right over there, right before her eyes, while Mama stands behind her. Her head reels as two worlds collide, one her current reality and one her long-buried past.

But the moment doesn’t last long, because soon Svooth is not-so-gently pushing Mabel over to her left, moving her grip to the girl’s wrist, one of her legs coming forward to stand in front of her adopted child. The movement is subtle, but Mabel immediately recognizes the guarded action, and an uneasy feeling washes over her. Why is Mama acting like this? Dipper is the last person she needs protecting from down here.

Mama scoffs, flippantly beckoning him over. “Come on then. And put ya

clothes back on already, we're in public for goodness sake! I ain't gonna tolerate any indecency from you, let's be real clear on that up front." It seems Mama failed to recognize that the only reason he's 'indecent' is because his clothes were forcibly removed from his body so no fabric would get in the way when they started selling off his guts... That, or she just doesn't care. Whichever it was, Dipper obeys anyway, silently shuffling over to them and sticking his arms back through his tattered shirt and his vest, the loose material hanging off of him like an ill-fitted coat.

Mama rolls her eyes. "Babydoll, you're to fix that up for him afta' we get back. Wh—now *what d'ya think yer doin'?*?" As she'd spoken the twins had grabbed hands, teary-eyed smiles on both their faces, and are seconds away from being locked in a shaky embrace when Svooth angrily yanks them apart, dragging Dipper back by his collar. A shocked Mabel watches his expression fall from awe to bewilderment and she swiftly turns to take two handfuls of skirt back into her fists.

"Mama please, he won't hurt me! I promise he won't, he's my brother, please, can't we just—"

"Shut your mouth." Svooth cuts her plea off coldly and Mabel instantly falls silent, her head bowing, her eyes raising to glance apologetically over at Dipper. She can see his eyes flitting back and forth between her and Mama, the perplexed uncertainty in his eyes asking a million questions that she can't answer.

"Don't make me regret this, child." The mole woman says to Mabel quietly before turning her attention to the knapsack that's still clutched tightly under one of Dipper's arms. She pokes at it with one long claw and without thinking he jerks the pack further away from her, looking regretful a second later when Svooth lets out a suspicious hum. "What's in that bag there, boy? Hand it over."

Dipper eyes the mole-spider hybrid's extended paw like it was the bony hand of Death. But wasn't she his salvation only a moment ago? Who is this lady anyway? Why is Mabel... How...

His mind hasn't really caught up to him yet, questions spinning in and out of focus with a low buzz of static. His eyes dart over to Mabel, his sister now mostly obscured from view by this glaring creature, but he can still see her. Like

a wilted flower she stands almost curled into the hem of the creature's dress, her eyes pleading as they bounce between him and the knapsack.

His vicegrip loosens. A part of him feels dumb for doing it, but he hesitantly places the bag within the woman's massive claws. She keeps her harsh blue eyes trained on him as she tosses the strap of the bag around her shoulder, wearing the knapsack like a sash. One long claw dips into the tiny hole of the zipper, quickly opening the sack in a precise movement before rummaging through its contents with unsavory *tsks* and suspicious hums. She pulls up the flare gun, immediately dropping it back in the bag, unimpressed. She then digs out Mabel's old grappling hook. He can hear Mabel gasp, even though it's soft and restrained. The metal hooks shimmer slightly in the crystals' heavy lighting, and for a second or two the woman simply squints at her reflection in the tiny blades. The frown on her face deepens, and she chucks it back into the brown bag.

"What ya need with all this here, boy?" she questions darkly. Before Dipper's brain can even begin to formulate some kind of a lie or half truth, the woman zips up the bag. "Mischief, no doubt. Best if Mama takes it fer safe keepin'."

"What? You can't..." Dipper shakes his head in protest, but the woman—*Mama?*—ignores him. Instead, she turns back to Mabel with a scowl.

"An' you, child, are *not* off the hook fer running off like that." Mabel blinks at the ground, glancing at Dipper and standing a bit straighter before concentrating solely on Mama's face as the woman continues to speak with a pointed finger wagging in Mabel's face. "Ya ain't ever ta do that again, d'ya hear me?"

"But I only did it because..."

"Hush, child. I don't wanna hear it."

"But Mama, you don't understand! I—"

His sister's words are cut off once again, this time with a soundless gasp when the mole woman painfully wrings her paws around Mabel's arms. "Child, have ya'll gon' stupid?" Mama yells at the girl as she harshly shakes her. His sister's eyes meet his for only a second, a pleading look like the one moments before flashing at him. Mabel's body rattles about like a ragdoll, her feet a clean

five feet off the dirt floor as the woman bobs Mabel up to her face. “Don’t back talk to your Mama, or—”

The seconds blur into a furious pace. His feet move forward on their own. The words, “Get your fucking hands *off* my sister,” fly out of his mouth with hard menace. His fist swings aimlessly towards the mole person dangling his sister in the air. And then time slows, the only audible sound being Dipper’s heart beating rapidly in his chest.

*She caught it.*

She fucking caught his wrist, mid-punch, her claws now digging painfully into his skin as she glares down at him with a face so icy the blood in his veins turns cold.

“Don’t ya *ever* so much as *think* it, boy,” she hisses menacingly, squeezing his wrist so tight he thinks he hears his bones cracking. His eyes grow large as her four blue ones slide into deathly slits. He looks to Mabel, who stands by helplessly in that fraction of second, her hands trembling as she stares at the two of them with an open mouth. Eons and eons past in those few milliseconds. “Not. *Ever.*”

Her free paw raises up high, whirring forward in full force, and the back of her hand slams into Dipper’s cheek. The resonating smack vibrates in the air, swallowing Dipper’s pain filled yelp and leaving a ringing sound in his ears. He tumbles to the ground, skin skidding across the hard earth. He blinks away the tears as he weakly sits up, gasping and spitting out a tiny stream of blood. Fingers tentatively touching his stinging cheek, he takes in the creature looming over him from her eight spindly legs to the stray black hairs spilling over into her face. He may not completely understand all of what’s happening, but he knows one thing for damn sure. This creature-woman-thing is *nobody*’s savior.

“Let that be a lesson to ya, boy,” she sneers. Fixing her hair and shawl with a huff, the monster turns and snaps her fingers, beckoning him like a dog, as she walks off with Mabel in hand. Dipper scrambles to his feet, watching Mabel as she sorrowfully looks at him over her shoulder. His feet dumbly follow them until they vanish into a dark tunnel.



## Part 16

Dipper tries to dig a finger in between the rusty metal shackle and his ankle, but it's no use. This thing is on way too tight.

It had been excruciatingly hard to just sit by passively and let that insane creature-lady chain him up to a wall when they'd arrived "home." His tongue longed to lash out curse after curse, his hands itched to wring her furry neck for what she'd done to Mabel. But the pain resonating from his swollen cheek had held his tongue for him. The image of that... that *thing* staring him down right before she'd smacked the crap out of him is branded into his brain, serving as a permanent reminder that when it comes to *this* nasty creature, you have to pick your battles. And Dipper already has one picked out, one he's going to need all his remaining strength for.

Grab Mabel, and get the hell out of here.

Even as the cogs in his head start whirring on an escape plan, starting with this shackle on his leg, his eyes continue to strain themselves in the dim greenish light, trying to catch a glimpse of his sister's silhouette as it silently flitters about the dark space, like a shadow. It's like some form of torture, having her so close after so long, and being physically restrained.

Dipper notices his hands shaking and tries to still them. He gingerly runs a fingertip over the stinging cut on his abdomen that's still exposed by his tattered shirt, wiping away the trail of blood that had dripped down to stain the top of his shorts. A harsh shiver wracks his body.

Earlier, on that table... that had been close. Too close. In those few seconds it'd taken for them to bring the knife to his skin, and he'd finally shut up with the futile begging, closed his eyes and turned away... he was positive that would be his last chance for a clear thought before it would all be drowned out by pure agony. And there was no moment of his entire life flashing before his eyes; no, he was only able to think of Mabel, and how he'd failed her.

And then, there she was. Appearing out of nowhere, very much alive, limbs still in tact. There really was a second there where Dipper thought he'd already died, because seeing her felt like something out of a dream. But then the noise of

the crowd had come jolting back into his ears, he'd felt the pressure of her weight on his torso, and he definitely couldn't deny the reality of those huge brown eyes boring into his.

There's no name for the potent emotions that thrash around inside him now. They turn his stomach over and over, keep his heart racing, his hands trembling. This is too colossal, too intense, too much at once. Being captured, then an inch away from a painful death. Being saved at the last possible moment by someone he never thought he'd see again, then getting slapped and imprisoned by the same creature that had bought his life back, the one that treats Mabel like her property.

Jesus, though. *Mabel*. Mabel, alive.

Was it really only a few hours ago that he was lying in that field, finally making an attempt at accepting her loss?

This is... it's...

It's a lot.

Dipper grabs his wrist, pinning it against his leg, forcing it to stop shaking. He takes several deep breaths, willing his heartbeat to calm down. Escape. That's what he needs to focus on right now. Get his shit together one last time today, and save everything else for later.

*Breathe, man. Think logically. What's the best way out of here?*

His mind immediately jumps to his pack, filled with a flare gun with extra ammo and a grappling hook that would all definitely be useful for an escape. But he's being kept in a little nook in the corner of the burrow, and the creature hid the backpack somewhere he couldn't see... Maybe Mabel might know where it is? Maybe it's the same place where the key to the Shackle on his leg is hidden. And if the two of them actually manage to get past this insane woman-thing, there's the matter of the winding tunnels he'd seen while fumbling around a few paces behind the creature and Mabel. There are so many, they're practically pitch dark, and he has no idea which one leads to the way out of here. With his luck, he'll lead them straight into another nest full of these bloodthirsty beasts, and they'd be dead meat.

But Mabel, she's been down here for years. Certainly she has at least some idea of which path is the right one?

There's only one person who can answer his endless line of questions, and she's sitting across the burrow with her back to him, engrossed in something in her hands. The mole lady hovers nearby, moving here and there around the enclosed space, fixing her hair, fussing with something on a table that he can't make out, putting on a record with songs that make the hairs on his arms prickle. She's always somewhere in between him and Mabel—purposefully, no doubt. Aside from the crackling music, it's quiet, the air stuffy and tense. Occasionally, piercing blue eyes will reflect in his direction, sending shivers down his spine.

If only there was a way to talk to Mabel without that thing breathing down his neck. But would she really ever leave them alone together? Dipper's heart sinks at how unlikely that seems. The way she clucks over his sister tells him she doesn't seem like the type to just leave Mabel without supervision. Plus if she did, wouldn't Mabel have tried to run?

The number of holes in his thought process rises higher and higher, all of them impossible to fill by himself.

Hours pass. Dipper's fingernail, now raw, continues to pick distractedly at the metal around his ankle, his thoughts going around in circles, always ending up back on Mabel. But she hasn't turned her head to look at him even once. Just keeps it bowed towards her lap. To quell the pangs poking and prodding at his insides, he reminds himself that the reason she won't look at him is because of the creature standing guard over both of them. That's got to be it. That has to be why she's acting so indifferent now, because she certainly wasn't before, rushing towards him, coming to his defense... right up to the point where he'd gotten slapped.

Dipper folds his arms over his knees and nestles his good cheek in the crook of his elbow. Even if Mabel is ignoring him to protect him or something, it doesn't make it hurt any less.

The sound of the record player lulls him into some sort of subdued, wakeful nightmare, and he's just about given up on getting the chance to talk to his sister anytime soon when basically a miracle happens. The thing stands abruptly, snatching whatever Mabel had been working on out of the girl's hands and

perching it on her head... it looks like a hat. Or a bonnet, or something. That's what Mabel has been concentrating so hard on? A stupid bonnet?

A surge of anger bubbles up inside him. Mabel's talent is supposed to be used for colorful sweaters for herself, not drab bonnets for this nasty, abusive piece of shit.

While he glares daggers at Svooth, she changes into a different dress, the furry body underneath as hideous as the rest of her. She glides to the entrance of the burrow, then begins to pace back and forth, massive paws patting her cheeks in an attempt to bring color to them. She suddenly stops her motions, standing tall on all eight of her legs in front of Mabel, who's still turned away from him. Blue eyes squint suspiciously at him in the background before she smiles and turns her full attention to the girl sitting before her.

"Baby Doll, me an' Mistah Mayor won't be out for long tonight," she tells Mabel, her voice a strange mix of sugar and venom, but there's also a hint of... fear? "But I expect ya'll both to be asleep when I get back, ya hear? And you keep to your room, Babydoll."

Mabel nods automatically, obediently. The creature smiles, blowing Mabel a few kisses, and Dipper isn't really certain, but he thinks Mabel's lips pucker silently in reception. The whole scene is bizarre, and makes him extremely uneasy.

"Nighty night," the creature singsongs, and the sound of the front door clattering shut makes Dipper's brows furrow in determination. He counts to ten in his head, before taking a breath.

*This is it.*

He gets to his knees, shuffles forward as far as the chain will let him, and softly calls her name. There's a beat of stillness. Then, finally, Mabel turns around.

"Dipper," she squeaks, her lip quivering as she springs to her feet and barrels into him. "You're really here." She drops into a crouch to draw him into another embrace, one that he can't help but get lost in for a while. But, he manages to come to his senses—escape now, hugs later.

Dipper forces himself to unravel his arms from around her, gripping her shoulders instead. “Okay, first things first. Any chance you know where the key to this cuff is?”

Mabel frowns uncomfortably. “What for?”

Dipper raises his eyebrows at her like it’s obvious. “We’re getting out of here, Mabel. Can’t really do that if I’m chained to a wall.” He tugs gently on her arm, ready to jump to his feet with his sister in tow, but she doesn’t budge. Confused, he turns back to see the whites of wide, frightened eyes shining through the darkness. “...What’s wrong?”

She shifts her gaze uneasily to the side, her hand flying up to twist at a wooden bead on an odd-looking necklace adorning her neck. “We can’t leave,” is all she says, in that quiet voice she keeps talking in.

“What do you mean? Of course we can.” He reassures her, laying a hand on her shoulder and sounding a lot more confident than he actually is.

“Mama won’t... Mama wouldn’t like it.”

Dipper’s face falls. Mama. Why in the hell does she keep calling that thing *Mama*?

For a few seconds he just stares at the dim outline of her thin body. Finally, it begins to sink in... This isn’t the same Mabel who stomped away from him holding a kite three years ago. It’s an unnerving realization, but it does make sense. From what he’s seen of this hellish place so far, he’s not really sure how she’s managed to stay alive, stay *sane* all these years. Honestly, he doesn’t think he’ll ever fully know all the details, even if they do make it out of this pit.

But Dipper is starting to form vague ideas. She’s adapted, that much is obvious.

*How much* she’s adapted is the real question. The more he contemplates it, the more his gut churns. The Mabel from memory is drifting further and further away from the girl sitting in front of him, and he’s not really sure how to process this.

But... no.

He can't think that way. It doesn't matter. He doesn't care. No matter how much has changed, she's still his sister, who he loves and who took a huge chunk of his heart with her when she kind of literally fell off the face of the earth all those years ago. And he'll die before he lets her spend the rest of her days chained to some sick, surrogate mole mother in a dark hole.

Now if only he could reign in his rampant emotions enough to focus. If Mabel was brainwashed so badly down here that she doesn't even *want* to try to escape with him, he's going to have to handle things delicately.

Dipper swallows, choosing his words carefully. "It's okay, Mabels." He can see her lower lip wobble at the nickname. "Don't... er... try not to think about who's gonna like it or not, just... you can tell me. It's okay to tell me, Mabel. Do you think you might know the way to the main tunnel out of here?"

She seems to consider this for a moment, but only ends up looking down at her hands. "I used to try and map out the tunnels, but I had to stop."

"Why?"

She just shrugs. "Mama," she says, not looking at him.

Right. Mama.

Dipper has to force himself to squelch all the bitter thoughts that are starting to gather and swirl around in his brain. Escaping needs to take priority over revenge, but it's hard.

Because he hates them. He hates them all, every single last one of these creepy crawly bastards. Especially this wannabe Mama, who was obviously the biggest factor in stealing away years of his sister's life. Even if that sinister spider-mole lady had saved them earlier.

Ugh. Reign it in, Dipper. *Focus.*

"I know you're scared Mabel, but... Mama's not here right now. This might be our only chance." The sick nickname she has for her captor sounds weird coming from his own mouth, and it leaves a nasty taste on his tongue. "Just, try and think—do you remember your way around the tunnels? Or just, anything from your old maps at all? I swear I'm gonna get you out of here, but I need

your help.”

It’s so hard to see down here, but he can tell Mabel is turning away from him. His heart sinks.

“I’m telling you. We can’t just leave. Don’t you think I’ve...?” Her voice has become so small he can barely hear her anymore. “It’s impossible,” she finishes, dropping her head, her matted hair falling to block her face from view.

Forget sinking, his heart is shattering into tiny little pieces. He reflexively reaches out to touch her shoulder, and she flinches.

*What did they do to you, Mabel?*

A silence falls between the two siblings, their long-awaited reunion not going quite like Dipper pictured in his head. Hopelessness radiates from the fragile girl beside him, and the feeling takes him back to a few hours ago, when his grief-riddled sobs had probably scared off every animal within a half mile radius. To think he’d almost given up on her just a few hours ago, when she’s been right below his feet...

Oh god, the thought scares him. He can’t mess this up.

“Please, Mabel.” His voice cracks out. “You gotta trust me.”

Her weary eyes take in his desperate face, before turning away to glance towards her room, her mind on the small hole in the wall inside. It’s the hole she made from digging out the glowing crystals. In it lies more radiant stones and all the scraps of paper she scribbled on, including a crude, incomplete map of the tunnels. She hasn’t touched it since her first psuedo-birthday, often forgetting the hole and the maps within it were even there.

Leaving Mama hasn’t been an option in Mabel’s mind for a long time now. It was never really an option to begin with.

The silence between them stretches on as Mabel bites into her dry lower lip, her eyes darting around the barely lit room, fingers twisting relentlessly at the bead on her necklace.

Mama keeps Mabel safe. Mama saved her life on more than one occasion,

and Dipper's. Mama is the only reason she's even alive right now. She's Mama's baby doll. Down here, Mama is the only one Mabel can trust.

"It's... it's not safe out there..."

"Mabel, *please*." Dipper's soft voice begs. His hands find hers in the dark. His warmth is a bit of a shock to her system, causing her to flinch. But her fingers instinctively latch on to his, holding him tight so he can't let go.

Something in her begins to stir as she stares at their embracing hands. Fuzzy little memories creep into her mind. Pushing through crowds, walking through school hallways, sitting on an armchair with a scary movie playing on the television... a warm hand always tucked in hers.

A true sense of comfort washes over her. Feelings she hadn't felt, hadn't *allowed* herself to feel in ages come bubbling forth. Her lips begin to tremble, her shoulders shaking slightly. Fat tears would be rolling down her cheeks by now, spilling over their hands, if she had it in her to produce them. She can still feel the sting in her eyes though, her body wanting to cry but too weak to do it.

She looks back up at her brother, nodding her head.

If there is anyone Mabel can trust with all her heart, no matter where she is, it's Dipper. She can't forget that. She hasn't. She could never.

Carefully, he speaks, hoping he hasn't misinterpreted what her nodding means. "We can make it. I promise you we will. But I need you, Mabel."

They squeeze each other's hands, and Mabel nods again. Her eyes dart back to the hole in the wall. That flicker of light she saw on her last escape attempt beaming down from above flashes in her head. Strong-willed eyes snap back to Dipper's. Her voice is still soft, yet somehow burning with strength.

"Okay."



## Part 17

It hardly feels like she's actually the one controlling her own body as she digs dirt-encrusted maps out of the wall, retrieves Dipper's pack from a hidden drawer in the bureau, smashes the porcelain jewelry box to the floor when it doesn't open after five minutes of fiddling with the clasp, picks up the metal key that laid inside.

Who is this girl blatantly breaking all the rules? Certainly not the Mabel who does exactly as she's told and works quietly in her corner day in and day out. It must be someone else, someone she forgot was there.

She may have found the strength to do this, but that doesn't take away the fear. Every time she looks over her shoulder, she half expects to see Mama standing in the doorway, four eyes burning with anger and disappointment and trained solely on her.

Dipper's unyielding encouragement is the only reason why she hasn't dived back into her bed of moss and leaves to think up some sort of apology for why she broke Mama's jewelry box. When she looks at his face, or hears his voice, she can see and hear the sturdiness there, the unbending resolve in his belief that he can and will get them to the surface unharmed. It gives her some semblance of a safety net to hold on to. At the same time it ignites the realization of how much she absolutely does *not* want to return to her bed of moss and leaves. Holy wow. To see sunlight again, to breath air that's crisp and clean, to return to a world where it's people she sees every day rather than mole creatures ravenous for her flesh... she could have all of it again. She really could. What was impossible is possible again. The look in his eyes assures her of that.

It's that look that energizes Mabel to free her brother from his shackle, help him dig a modestly sized green crystal out of the wall, pour over her crudely drawn maps with him. These maps haven't been touched or even given a second thought in years, and to tell the truth she's not even a hundred percent sure they're right anymore. The tunnels have changed over the years, she knows that much. But it's all they have to go on. It'll have to do.

Before she knows it Dipper is rolling up her most up-to-date map and leading her out into the side tunnel that ends at Mama's more extravagant

burrow, one of his hands holding the crystal out in front of them and the other holding hers. It's the first time in a long time that Mabel has left the burrow without Mama. Her feet tingle as if she's stepping on prickling little needles rather than dirt. Her heart speeds up, her breathing uneven, jittery fingers twisting and twisting at the bead on her necklace.

"If your map is right, the way out of here might be a lot simpler than I thought," comes Dipper's low voice, jarring her out of her nerve-induced stupor. "Just follow my lead, and don't let go of my hand."

She can only nod, trying to take in calming breaths but only succeeding in getting herself more worked up. Dipper notices right away. He steps closer, bringing a steady hand to the back of her head to press their grimy foreheads together. "Hey... hey, Mabel, look at me." he says softly, and she raises her frightened eyes to meet his determined ones in the low light. "It'll be alright. I told you, I'm getting you out of here."

He declares it so unwaveringly that she finds herself believing it, for real this time.

"Okay?" he asks, their eyes still locked.

"Okay," she breathes.

The next thirty minutes or so are filled with twisting, turning, running, hiding. Repeating the furtive process all over again. Turns out navigating these tunnels is much, much easier when you have someone watching your back.

A few times they get lost, and have to stop to hastily study the map again by the light of a crystal in Mabel's hand before choosing a different direction. Dipper is careful to count their steps in the darkness, check every corner before they creep around it. Sometimes he'll make out a moleperson or two, and they're forced to backtrack. There's one point where they get really lucky, Mabel finding a shadowy crevice in the dirt wall for them to duck into just before a few of the creatures pass by. The twins hold their breaths, crammed against each other between the rocks. Dipper somehow gets his arms around her in the cramped space, holding her protectively, and that drive-by thought of how happy she is that he's here hits her again.

As they gradually make their way further from the burrow, his grip becomes

her anchor. She never lets go for anything, clutching his sweaty hand like it's her last lifeline. Yeah, the connection is there so they won't lose each other in the tunnels, but to Mabel, it's much more than that. It reminds her to keep her head up, keep thinking of what lies ahead, rather than what she's leaving behind. She tells herself she shouldn't be sorry to leave. But even if it served as sort a prison, somewhere along the way this place grew to be her home. If you could call it that. That has to explain this sick feeling that keeps sending pangs to her chest.

At his signal they turn down another long, empty passageway, their feet moving quickly and quietly, his covered by dirty sneakers, hers bare. "This is where your map cuts off," She hears Dipper say from his position just ahead of her, pulling her steadily along at a jogging pace. "But I'm pretty sure we're almost there, we can just wing it."

Mabel's heart thrums with hopeful excitement, hardly believing they've actually made it this far without running into trouble, something she'd never been able to do years ago, when it was just her, alone and scared... except for that one time, which had been sort of a fluke in itself. But having Dipper with her makes all the difference. Together, they actually stand a chance. She won't be turning around this time.

She pictures the surface, now so close within her reach, a bit of a smile blooming on her face as they cover the last quarter mile of the tunnel. Dipper seems to be getting ahead of himself too, because when they reach the end of it, he peeks around the corner with more vigor and less stealth than usual. He blanches instantly and ducks back into the shadows, his face scrunched with regret.

"Shit," he whimpers under his breath.

"What's wrong?"

The words wisp out of him in that tremulous gray area between a whisper and a murmur. "It splits off into four different tunnels... and one of them's occupied." She feels his hand squeeze tighter around hers, slick with sweat. "I-I think they might've saw me."

Right on cue, a slippery voice calls out across the cave, making both twins shudder. "Heyyy kiddy... I know yer over there, how bout comin' on out to play?" Dread begins to spread throughout her body as Mabel places the voice

from earlier at the market—it's the moleman that had been about to do the unthinkable to her brother. The one called Kurvt.

Fear paralyzes her, whisking the hope away as quickly as it came. This was stupid, so stupid. Of course they can't just leave. You can never just leave! The rules were there for a reason, and she's broken them all, dooming them both, because now, Mama isn't around to save them.

The voices of Kurvt and his unnamed partner slink closer and closer, muttering out the horrible things they're going to do to her brother once they get their hands on him again, haunting Mabel's ears. Maybe if they go now, if they're fast enough, they can make it back to Mama's burrow in one piece. But she can't get herself to move, and beside her, Dipper stands firm. Out of the corner of her eye, she can see him slowly reaching around to the bag on his back.

What is he *doing*?

Mabel's face goes even paler. Oh no. He's not planning on trying to fight these things, is he? They're too big, too strong. He'll lose, big time. They both will. Dipper was always such a practical guy, surely he's smart enough to know that?!

He whispers something out of the side of his mouth, and it takes a second for her racing mind to un-jumble the words and actually process them. "Get ready to move."

"But—"

Before she can finish her sentence Kurvt's unnamed partner busts around the wall opposite them, powerful legs propelling him from the wall to the ground, paws raised to strike. Apparently he was only expecting one, rather than two human teenagers ripe for the pickin', because he halts his attack, a despicable smile curving under his snout.

"Ey, Kurvt! Looks like we hit the jackpot agai—*augh!*" Mabel shuts her eyes and when she opens them again the moleman is writhing on the ground, yowling in pain, the aftermath of a few orange sparks fizzling into the dirt, the stench of burning flesh reaching her nose. She reels around just in time to catch Dipper lowering the flare gun.

She opens her mouth, but Dipper doesn't wait around for her to find words, only snatches up her wrist. "Come on," he croaks. "Come on, we gotta move!"

The two of them burst out into the crossroads together; it's much brighter in here, a large yellow crystal jutting out of the ceiling. Kurvt roars towards them from their right, but Dipper's adrenaline-charged reflexes allow him to reload and catch the mole man in the stomach with another flare. It knocks Kurvt to the ground, becoming caught in his ratty old vest. Sparks shower around the twins, a few burning the skin on Mabel's exposed arms. She squeaks and flails, but Dipper keeps pulling her until they're right in the center of the junction, four choices of tunnels spread out in front of them.

He hesitates for only a second, then points towards the path to their center-right. "That one leads sort of uphill, I think it's our best bet!"

Mabel nods frantically, and the pair takes off again. They're almost within the shadow of their next tunnel before another voice calls out into the cave.

"Babydoll?"

Mabel stops dead in her tracks, then unintentionally pulled to the ground when Dipper keeps running. He curses, leaping back to help her up—it's a hard task since her limbs don't seem to want to cooperate, her disbelieving eyes trained on one thing only.

There, in the entrance of the tunnel to their left, stands Mama, her arm hooked through the Mayor's, her four blue eyes wide with shock.

"Babydoll! What the—what in the *hell* do ya think yer doin'!"

As Mabel attempts to regain her balance, her first impulse is to beg for forgiveness, but her dry tongue is sticking to the roof of her mouth, her lips trembling, and she can't... she can't seem to...

Suddenly a cold feeling jolts through her, as she hears the sound of another flare being loaded. She snaps her head around to find Dipper training the small red pistol on Mama, finger on the trigger, already in the process of pulling back to shoot—and something inside of her wails out in protest.

*Mama...!*

“No, don’t!” Mabel jabs the gun upwards at the last second, and instead of whizzing towards Svooth’s chest, the flaming mini-rocket bursts into the crystal on the high ceiling of the junction. Harsh orange light reflects off its shiny, jagged surface, blinding the sensitive eyes of Mama, the mayor, the fallen Kurvt, and a few others who have appeared in the surrounding tunnels during the scuffle. While they’re still disoriented, Dipper keeps wildly firing off flares at the crystal until he runs out of ammo. Flames and sparks rain down relentlessly, creating a mini wall of fire; the chaos and the pained wails of Mama in particular cause Mabel’s hand to fly up to her neck, seeking the comfort of that one, twistable bead, but it’s not there. She glances down, perplexed—it’s gone. No, no, where the heck did it go? For some crazy reason, finding her necklace has suddenly become her greatest priority, and her eyes anxiously rake the ground around her, blocking out the flaming scene, only seeking out her thread of wooden beads. Where is it? *Where is it?*

“Run!” Dipper’s voice yells in her ear, just as Mabel spots her necklace about ten feet away. She lunges toward it, but a hand on her dress drags her back. “What are you doing? Mabel, *run!*”

“My necklace—”

“Leave it!”

His commanding, almost aggressive tone disintegrates her odd impulse to risk their lives for a couple of beads (the exposed feeling on her collarbone aside) and she stops fighting him, whirling around to start running.

“R-right—sorry!”

Mabel does her best not to look back as her and Dipper scurry up the winding incline, hand in hand, their skin pouring sweat. The shrieks and howls behind them get quieter and quieter until she can barely hear them anymore. Her thin legs start to feel tired pretty quickly; extreme physical exertion wasn’t exactly a big part of life in the burrow, and that combined with the all the earlier distress has her pace slowing.

Dipper detects it immediately, offering to carry her on his back, but she refuses since he’s looking pretty worse for wear himself, his left knee buckling every so often. She rallies, scraping up bits of energy with the help of the adrenaline still surging through her veins.

As the twins cover more and more distance with no signs of pursuit, the panic begins to lift, although not by much. Their iron grip on each other's hands at least relaxes a bit, their movements less jittery. Along the way Mabel spots a worn pine tree hat, the sight of it triggering all sorts of joyful, Dipper-related memories in her head, and she scoops it up as they jog past, holding it out to her brother.

"I believe... this is yours," she pants with a grin.

He lets out a pleased half chuckle, half wheeze, appreciatively taking the hat from her hand. "Yes, yes it is," he pants back, reaching up to place it back where it belongs. "Thanks."

Just as some sense of comfort, of good ol' cheerful normalcy stirs within her, an awful screeching noise echoes up from behind them, and the smiles drop from their faces. They do their best to pick up the pace, but the sound is closing in on them impossibly fast. The high pitch of it stabs at Mabel's eardrums, the former terror returning as the noise draws closer and closer, sounding more and more familiar.

The screeches turn to words, the clearest one being an unsettling, guttural cry of "*BABYDOLL!*" Mama is not calling for Mabel. She's roaring for her.

Dipper pulls and pulls at her arm, shouting encouraging things back her way. "We're almost there, we can make it!"

But Mabel keeps stumbling, the fear that's been trained into her over the years taking its toll, and soon the terrifying source of the screeching comes into full view, grotesque spider legs skittering disturbingly along the wall, knit dress burned in places, greasy black hair flying around madly.

"*You stop right there!*" Mama shrieks, ricocheting off the wall, practically sailing through the air towards them. Dipper, now facing the fact that they'll never be able to outrun her, does the only thing he can think of and drops the backpack to bound in front of a quaking Mabel, who instinctively huddles behind him. The ground rumbles ominously, signifying Mama's landing right in front of them, and Mabel hides her face in the sweat-dampened fabric of his vest.

"Just leave her the fuck alone already!" Dipper's venomous words vibrate resiliently through his body, entering her ears from where she has one of them

pressed against his back. *No, no, don't say that*, Mabel thinks frantically, her hands curling into his vest at his shoulder blades. *You'll only make it worse, she'll only hurt you more—*

“*YOU!*” she hears Mama bellow. “No doubt in my mind all this is *your* doin’, ya vile little rat!”

Mabel is unable to hold back her sob when her brother is cruelly wrenched away from her for what feels like the hundredth time today. She’s forced to watch helplessly as Mama drags him kicking and screaming a few paces back down the tunnel, hauls him up until he’s dangling in the air—oh no, *no*, it’s not fair, *it’s not fair*. She’s so tired of being separated from her brother, of just standing by and watching as terrible things happen to him, powerless to do anything to stop it. It’s not *fair*, but what can she do?

She starts to run down the tunnel, fully prepared to throw herself at Mama’s feet and beg for Dipper’s life again, but the mole woman hisses at her, and sound bringing her feet to a halt. “Child, don’t you move another muscle, or all this ends right now.” Swooth says, glaring her down. “I’ll deal with you after.”

But Dipper, it seems, has other plans for his sister. “Go, Mabel! Take my bag and run, now!”

His voice rings in her ears as blinding tears pool in her eyes. He’s telling her to run... he wants her to run.

And what, is she just supposed to leave him behind?

“Shut yer damn mouth ya dirty, lyin’ *mongrel!*” Mama screams in his face, shaking his body around just as callously as she’d done to Mabel earlier. “Babydoll, *you stay put!*”

“Don’t listen to her, Mabel!” Dipper yells hysterically, struggling against Mama’s grip. “Go, keep going!”

Mabel hears him loud and clear. But her feet won’t budge. She can only stand there on shaky legs, taking in the horrifying sight of her brother trapped in between those unrelenting claws.

Mama smiles approvingly at her apparent obedience, the smile turning



malicious as she leers back at Dipper, using her hold on his arms to pin him against the cave wall.

“My babydoll’s not goin’ anywhere, because she’s a good, well-behaved little girl,” the sickeningly sweet voice drops to a snarl, “when she’s not bein’ tricked and goaded by disgustin’ vermin like you.”

Dipper ignores the ominous words, only continues to yell in Mabel’s direction, where she remains frozen. Even as far away as he is, she can still see the desperation in his eyes, the streaks of wetness on his cheeks. “I-it’s okay! It’s okay Mabel, please, *please just—*”

His wobbly pleading is cut off with a choke as Svooth thrusts one of her paws against his windpipe. “*You*, you think ya can just—*waltz* on in here and take my baby away from me?!” She brings his body away from the wall only to ruthlessly slam him back into it. Dipper cries out on impact and Mabel sinks to her knees in the dirt, hands over her ears as she sobs audibly, begging for Mama to stop, stop, *stop*. But the mole woman doesn’t even glance her way, keeping her crystal clear blue eyes on her prey, now holding him exclusively by the neck. “I warned you, boy. I warned ya not to mess with me n’ my own. *Well*, we’ll see if ya learn yer lesson after I rip out that nasty throat’a yours!”

As Svooth’s lips draw back, revealing a mouthful of vicious, razor sharp teeth, something silver glints in Mabel’s vision, lying a few feet away on the cave floor. She squints, making out a... is that a baseball bat?

She swiftly looks up to see Dipper’s hands scrabbling fruitlessly at the paws wrung around his neck, his cheeks dark from lack of air, as Mama rises up on her legs, her signature poise to attack. Mabel’s wild eyes then flit back over to the silver bat, and she bites her lip.

When Mama has the intent to kill, there’s no stopping it. No amount of begging or pleading will change her mind. So Mabel makes a split second decision, even though the instincts that have been keeping her alive for years scream against it—and she unfreezes.

It happens quickly. There’s no warning, no battle cry. Just before Svooth gets the chance to sink her teeth into Dipper’s throat, the bat swings through the air, crashing into her back. The livid woman doubles over, howling in pain, releasing her hold on a purple-faced Dipper and letting him slouch to the ground where he

remains, unmoving. But instead of picking him back up, Mama whirls on her baby. An eerie hissing sound exudes from her clenched snout as she flicks her eyes sharply between the silver bat and Mabel's stricken face, turning the girl's blood ice cold.

Quivering fingers lose their grip on the makeshift weapon, and it falls to the cave floor with a clang. With every fearful step back she takes, a few of Mama's legs stalk forward, slowly but surely closing in on her. The hissing gets louder and louder until it culminates with a furious screech, and the dread in Mabel's stomach spills over completely.

She's seen Mama angry before, but never like this. Never to the point where she felt like prey, rather than a daughter about to be punished for rule-breaking. Wrath has contorted the face of her mole mother to almost unrecognizable levels, the caring woman who'd spun her around and around to music from a record player nowhere to be found. All her fur stands on end, protruding repulsively out from the rips and burns in her dress; even the greasy black hair on top of her head puffs out, giving the normally poised woman a chillingly crazed appearance. Her eyes, clear and blue as ever, are glazed over with rage and disgust, narrowed into four angry slits. She rises taller and taller on her eight spindly legs and Mabel can do nothing but stare up at Mama, wrap her arms around herself, and cower.

"You horrible, ungrateful *brat!*" Svooth screams, spittle raining down on Mabel's face. "After all I've done for you, *this is how ya treat ya Mama!*"

"Mama, please... I didn't..." she attempts, her voice tiny and weak. A paw darts forward to grab Mabel by the hair and fling her to the hard ground, her brittle body bouncing on impact, a pained yelp leaving her lips. She groans and rolls over, trying feebly to get back up, but the mole woman rounds on her again.

"*Mama,*" she wails, trying to break through to the sympathy that she knows lies inside the woman *somewhere...* but it's no use. The word falls meaningless on Svooth's ears, intent to *maim, break, kill* written all over her furrowed face. Choking out sobs, a piece of Mabel's heart crumbles away as it dawns on her... no matter what she was before, it's clear that this creature is not her Mama. Not now, not anymore.

A leg begins to crush down on her throat, making it impossible to even let

out a squeak. Mabel's small hands instinctively jump to the furry black appendage, but they do virtually nothing to stop it from bearing down further and further into her neck. As her chest spasms with panic, Svooth leans down close, speaking with delicate, dangerously sincere words.

“See here, babydoll... if I can't have ya... no one will.”

Mabel's visions swims in and out, her head feeling fuzzy. There's no point fighting it anymore; any second now, she's going to black out. It's hard to believe she's going to die by the hand—or leg—of the woman who'd done so much to protect her over the years... and then... Dipper... she hopes by some miracle he at least can make it out safe...

*THWACK!*

A terrible cracking noise echoes up and down the tunnel, the pressure on her neck releasing, her lungs immediately gasping for air. Through her starry, spotted vision she can see Svooth's body slumping to the side to reveal her brother standing there with the bat still raised, breathing heavily, an enraged look on his features. When he spots her slowly sitting up on the ground, her chest heaving for breath, his arms lower, his expression falling to worried relief.

A moment passes where the twins stare just at each other with huge eyes. Dipper is the first to snap out of it, bursting forward, hauling Mabel to her feet, taking her hand.

She knows they have to get moving again, but she's too dizzy, too overwrought by the unnerving image of Mama's—n-no, no—Svooth's body, sprawled out on the ground, limp and lifeless. She's never seen her look so vulnerable before. The sight threatens to unhinge her. There's a twinge in Mabel's chest, and she sways on her feet, but Dipper is quick to steady her.

“Is she...?” Mabel hears herself ask in a faint voice. A leg twitches, and Dipper shakes his head, beginning to hurriedly pull her away.

“Just knocked out,” he says hoarsely. “C'mon, there's no telling how long we have before she wakes up.”

He recovers the brown knapsack, temporarily forgotten in the scuffle. And then they're running, Dipper tugging and tugging at her hand until the running

turns into sprinting. Hair whipping around her face, she dares a glance over her shoulder, getting one last glimpse of the twitching body before it's swallowed up by the tunnel. The dizzy feeling gets stronger with every stride she takes. But they don't slow down.

More and more running. Skidding to a stop, just when she's sure she can't take another step. She barely registers the grappling hook in Dipper's hand. Suddenly his arm is hooked around her waist, practically crushing her body to his, and they're flying through the air, rebounding out of the dark, landing on solid ground with a thud.

Somehow, Mabel manages to stagger back to her feet, blinking wearily... and it all hits her at once. The light of the full moon blinds her, making her squint. Something foreign prickles at her feet, tickling her knees, and she looks down to see what her brain blankly catalogs as grass. A breeze whispers past her cheek, almost knocking her on her butt. Her heart pounds faster and faster, her hand flying up to her neck, seeking out a bead to twist only to find nothing there. She spins around to see Dipper approaching slowly, his arms extended out towards her; she can see his mouth moving, but can't make out the words. Come to think of it, she can't make out anything, really.

All she can see are flashes of Mama—her icy stare, her still, lifeless body, her claws wringing around Dipper's neck—before Mabel's eyes roll back into her head, and she sees nothing at all.

## Part 18

“*Mabel!*” Dipper’s voice cracks through the cool night air. He hurdles himself down next to his sister’s limp form, touching the back of his hand to her grubby cheek, holding his fingers to the pulse in her neck, feeling for her heartbeat.

It’s okay... it’s okay. Thank god. She’s only passed out. She’ll be alright.

He sits back on his knees, his eyes almost perfect circles as he catches his breath. A single giddy, disbelieving laugh scratches its way out of his dry throat.

They made it. There were more than a few times back there where he had been positive it was all over. But no, he and Mabel had defeated the odds (more like given the odds two middle fingers and a big ‘fuck you’) and actually *made it*.

The giddiness dies down as he glances warily back at the mouth of the pit. They can’t have much time. Any second now, those *things* could be recovering from the blast and skittering out of that hole in the earth by the hoards, more than ready to devour them both. That sick, wannabe *Mama*, who’d nearly killed them out of spite, leading the charge. They can’t stay here. No matter how lightheaded or shocked he feels, he’s got to get them out of here.

Somehow he manages to pull himself together, his right cheek smarting when he wipes away a few stunned tears to clear his vision. Ignoring his screaming joints, he hefts his fallen sister into his arms, forcing his wobbly legs to straighten up into a standing position. He’s pretty much running on fumes now, but it’s not impossibly difficult to keep a hold on her, since she barely feels like she weighs anything. Despite the nagging urgency, Dipper can’t stop himself from pausing to stare at her slackened face, lit up faintly by the moon. Beneath all the dirt and the weariness, it almost looks like she could be sleeping. Her eyes twitch under her closed eyelids, while Dipper’s become moist again, his jaw shaking, taken aback by the way her chest rises and falls as she breathes.

He swallows it down. It’s still not the time. Reveling in having his sister back can’t happen until she’s somewhere safe, and *this* cursed place is anything but.

Mabel lets out a tiny groan when Dipper hoists her more securely into his grasp, then bolts for the Shack as fast as he's capable of at this point, leaving the deadly silence of that damned clearing behind without a single glance back.

He can only keep up the running pace for so long before his aching body finally puts on the brakes, and he forced to slow to more of a shuffling jog. His feet obstinately plod forward, maneuvering around roots and stumps in the dark, tripping a miraculously small number of times when taking into account how woozy his head feels, how quickly his heart is beating. Although it's hard to tell if the rapid heartbeat is due to being on the cusp of physically and emotionally spent with a possible army of mole people in hot pursuit, or because Mabel's breath keeps tickling his neck from where her head lays on his shoulder.

Either, or. Both are pretty feasible options.

Mabel stirs again, slipping down in his grip, and he has to pause to lug her back up with a grunt.

Now down to a power walk, Dipper lets his head slump to the side, resting it on top of his sister's. He distracts himself from the pain, the shock, the fear, and the relentless neck tickling by picturing the looks on Dad's and Stan's faces when he walks through the door with Mabel in tow. The thought makes him positively beam, makes him hold the girl in his arms closer against him, makes his eyes fall closed as he presses his nose to the top of her head—

Dipper walks straight into a bush and swears through his teeth, shaking twigs out of his trainers as he hastily redirects himself.

Alright, the eyes have gotta stay open, champ. Halfway there.

His thoughts stray back to his parents' reactions to seeing Mabel again when something important occurs to him, jolting his drooping eyelids wide open. Crap. How the hell are they ever going to explain any of this? What is Mabel going to say when people ask where she's been for the past three years? What is *he* going to say when they ask how he found her?

...Should it be the truth? His gut is telling him no. Pretty adamantly. Dipper gnaws worriedly on the inside of his cheek as he pictures Mabel trying to explain to their parents, the cops, the inevitable press how she's been living underground amongst a society of bloodthirsty humanoid half-spider-half-moles, how one of

them adopted her permanently ala *Misery*, forcing her to knit ugly bonnets all day, and—

Yeah. No. Showing up out of the blue and covered head to toe in blood and dirt with a story like that would probably just hook his sister up with a one-way ticket to a psyche ward, and there's no fucking way he's letting that happen.

No, he's definitely going to have to come up with something else for her to tell everyone. But it'll have to be fairly elaborate, and right now his brain isn't in any shape to weave together that complicated of a story... he'll have to start small. Come up with something solid enough to get through the inevitable questions that'll be asked tonight, and worry later about what'll come tomorrow.

The last mile consists of Dipper meticulously spinning lies in his head about where he found her, when he found her, and why he looks like he's been violently mugged. Some of the lies are weak at best, but he's counting on the fact that, at least for tonight, everyone will be so enthralled with having Mabel back in the first place that they won't push too hard for the specifics.

Mabel starts to squirm, mumbling words into his neck, rousing Dipper from his thoughts and truly putting his remaining arm strength to the test. He's kind of lost as to what's going on with her at the moment. She can't still be passed out, because he saw her crack open her eyes once a few minutes ago... Although when she did, she just frowned in confusion for a second and then closed them again. Maybe she *is* actually asleep? Makes sense to him. With the night she's had, he wouldn't blame her if she slept for days. Well, not *days*. Mabel in a coma is definitely not what anybody needs right now.

Soft lips graze the skin near his pulse as she continues to murmur gibberish, causing goosebumps to prickle across his flesh like wildfire. Dipper grimaces, his face burning at his own reaction. *Ho-kay*, yeah, wow. Definitely not the appropriate time for any of that. Oh-ho, wait a sec—there's *never* an appropriate time for any of that.

And of course his scumbag of a brain then decides to go ahead and rile up a memory from earlier that day, when he'd openly admitted to himself that yes, he'd fantasized about his sister and no, he didn't give a shit about what that implied. Except that was before, when he was sure he'd never see her again. Before the incredible, yet completely terrifying whirlwind that served as the past

few hours of his life. And now that she's virtually come back from the dead, all those questionable feelings he mentally 'fessed up to are suddenly much, much more real than he'd like them to be, and uh, yeah, he needs to go back to giving a shit, asap. For both their sakes.

...Fucking hell. Really? Mabel has been back in his life for all of like, four hours. They literally just almost died horribly gruesome deaths minutes ago. Is he really thinking about this *now*?

"What is wrong with you," Dipper mutters to himself, his body curving into a hunch as he trudges amongst the leaves and dirt. What was once a run is now on the verge of a limp, the pain in his knee red-hot and achy.

"What's wrong with me?" A weak voice croaks right into his ear, startling him out his self-berating train of thought. "How 'bout what's wrong with you? You're the one who keeps walkin' into stuff."

"It was a rhetorical question." Dipper automatically shoots back before he blinks and twists his head to find Mabel staring at him. "You're awake," he says dumbly.

"Is that what I am?" she says, shrugging wearily in his arms. "I've been trying to figure it out. Whether I was awake, or just having this crazy realistic dream about you and me and pine trees."

Soft laughter trickles out of him. "No, you're definitely awake."

"I'm awake." She repeats, and he feels her arms creeping up to snake fully around his neck, her face hiding in the crook. "I'm awake. And you're still here. Phew. Wasn't sure there for a sec."

"Yup, still here," he replies quietly, his legs slowing to a halt.

The twins fall silent as they meld themselves together in a makeshift embrace, the first one they've shared today where they don't have to worry about being dragged apart. Happy sighs are drowned out by the natural hum of the woods, and they grip each other with more feeling. They both needed this.

However when he feels his wobbly arms on the verge of giving way, Dipper is forced to cut the moment short. "Uh, Mabel?" His voice strains, "Is—there



any way you can walk from here? I'm kind of about to drop you, sorry."

"Oh, yeah, sure thing."

Dipper helps her down and upright, his lungs exhaling, his arms deflating like sad little balloons as soon as they're free of the extra weight. He's not even sure how he's still standing. Now that the adrenaline's worn off, the his injuries are starting to make themselves known, and painfully so. Swinging his floppy arms back and forth to get some feeling back into them, his eyes make their way down Mabel's legs to her bare feet.

"Right, you don't have shoes..." He frowns in thought. "I could probably piggyback you the rest of the way."

"Heck no, this is awesome." Mabel laughs next to him, her foot hovering in the air, a throng of pine needles clutched in between her toes. The moonlight that filters through the treetops reveals a smile on her face so wide that you'd think it was her birthday or something. Her toes spread and she flings them away, watching them rain back to the forest floor. "Ha!"

Dipper raises an eyebrow, chuckling. "Well don't blame me if you step on a pinecone or something." He takes her hand. "It's not much further anyway. I think I can see the lights of the Shack."

"The Shack... the *Shack*," She repeats the word mistily, like she'd done before, as if she's struggling to get the idea through her head. "...This is weird," she adds after a long pause. Dipper turns to stare at her profile, his lips parted slightly, as she looks blankly at some random spot in the distance. It seems to hit them both at the same time.

He reaches out for her hand, gently lacing up their fingers and squeezing. "You're going home, Mabel."

She says nothing, her eyes big and glossy as they glance over to connect with his.

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Dipper has to coach her on a few things before they can go inside. Don't mention the hole, mole people, how she's been living, or anything that happened today. If they ask her what happened, where she's been, about her injuries, her

appearance, whatever—she should just shake her head. Tell them she's not ready to say, yet. They should listen, since she's obviously in such fragile condition. Meanwhile, he'll do all the talking.

At his sort of long winded list of instructions Mabel just nods with an unfocused, glazed over look in her eyes, and Dipper purses his lips uneasily, praying that she actually took it all in, that she'll do what he's asking from her. He knows he's essentially asking her lie, and that she was never very fond of lying, but this is for her own good. To protect her.

Then there's that whole matter to address of them both looking like they'd gotten hit by a car and buried alive. Mabel's cuts and bruises might be able remain a mystery for now along with everything else, but his can't. He tries to hide the worst of it, brushing himself off as much as possible, zipping his vest all the way up to his chin. It looks stupid, but at least it conceals his shredded shirt and the inevitable marks on his neck from almost being choked to death. *Twice*, the morbid thought surfaces in his head. Not much he can do about his scraped elbows and knees or bruised cheek, but. At least everything else can be covered up.

Although he's done his best to think of every detail and have everything prepared, there really is no telling how this is going to go down. Dipper checks his watch. It's pretty damn late, but he knows Dad will still be awake waiting up for him, probably pissed beyond all belief.

*Well... he's not going to stay pissed for long.*

His heartbeat picks up speed as they approach the back porch at last, his sister scurrying a pace behind him, holding tighter and tighter to his hand. Taking a deep breath, Dipper pries open the door, mindful of keeping his arm around a hesitant Mabel as he guides her inside. When he shuts the door he automatically locks it for good measure, a little bit of fear still bubbling around his insides. But as far as he could tell, no one had followed them.

The house is quiet. Mabel takes a few steps, staring around at the inside of the old Mystery Shack, a disoriented look on her face. He can't even fathom what sorts of thoughts must be going through her head. All of this really must be sort of like a dream to her, after living in such bleak conditions for so long. And bleak was putting it way too mildly.

“Dad,” Dipper calls out. From down the hall, an irritated voice responds and he can see Mabel jittering, tearing up and covering her mouth at the sound of it.

“Nice of you to show up, Dipper. You ready to tell me why you blatantly disobeyed what I said earlier?”

“*Dad*,” he says again, his voice breaking.

The incoming footsteps move faster. “Dipper? What is it? Are you—”

Dad rounds the corner, freezing in place when he looks towards the door and sees Mabel staring back at him. It takes a second or two for it to sink in. Then the phone in his hand clatters to the floor, his mouth opening and closing, his face going to pieces.

“Oh my god... oh my *god*...”

Despite the hardships their family has suffered, Dipper has only seen his dad cry a few times, so the joyful tears that immediately start to trail down his old man’s face trigger his own floodgates back open. Wetness gathers quickly in his eyes as he watches Dad rush forward to kneel down in front of Mabel, his shaking hands moving to cup her face. Then he’s gathering her up in his arms, rocking her side to side, kissing her matted hair, her name falling from his lips in pure amazement. Mabel’s shoulders shake and jerk as her arms reach up to latch around his neck, muffled sobs emanating from the spot where her face is buried in his shirt.

Dad is overflowing with awe, just as Dipper had been when he’d first laid eyes on Mabel in that market. Round, questioning eyes land on his son, but right now Dipper is incapable of responding with anything better than a shrug and a thick laugh through his tears.

“How did you... Where did you...” The older man seems to just give up on words altogether, instead brusquely reaching for Dipper’s vest and pulling him down into the hug. Dipper doesn’t resist, dropping to his good knee, resting his non-bruised cheek on the unoccupied shoulder. He drapes his arm around Mabel’s body, the arms of their father strongly encircling them both, and there’s a long stretch where the three of them just cling to each other, crying, laughing, and crying some more.

Their embrace only ends at the sound of hooves on stairs, and Mabel lets out another loud cry, shifting out of her cocoon of arms to reunite with her beloved pet pig. The sounds she's making and the look on her face as she cuddles and cradles her surrogate son is more than enough to make Dipper thankful for his decision to keep up with Waddles throughout the years on top of everything else. More tears are shed after he runs to wake up Stan—the old dude's hearing aide must've been turned down—who skids into the hallway in his slippers and undershirt a second later, looking dumbstruck. And apparently Dipper can't handle seeing Stan in tears either without crying more himself.

Dad calls Mom, who jumps in the car straightaway, while Dipper delivers quick phone calls to Soos and Wendy, who both show up within minutes. It's amazing how fast the dreary fog that has saturated the Shack and everyone in it since Mabel went missing starts to rise up and float away, smiles and laughter and happy tears sweeping out the dusty layer of hopelessness that blanketed the place. The miserable weight that has been bearing down on Dipper's shoulders lifts, leaving him feeling light and free, a sensation so foreign to him that he can barely contain himself.

He can see it on everyone else's faces, too. Mabel's dreamy state seems to become more and more lucid the more time she spends in the Shack. It's hard to recognize his normally browbeaten father with all the vibrant happiness lighting up Dad's face, outshining the worry wrinkles, the gray in his hair. Stan hasn't looked this young in years, the pessimistic hunch knocked right out of the old man's back. Soos can't stop crying, Mabel's tiny frame hidden within his chubby arms as he blubbers out "*doo-hoo-huuude*" every time he gets the chance, and Wendy, who's normally so reserved about showing extreme emotions, has red eyes, wet cheeks, and a permanent smile stamped on her freckled face.

They end up in the living room, and Mabel sticks to his directions perfectly, shaking her head at any questions that start to pop up. The rest of her non-answer involves hiding her face in either his or Dad's shoulder as they closely flank either side of her, her arms closing tighter around the pig in her lap. Mabel is so adamant about keeping quiet that he starts to wonder whether she's doing it because he told her to, or because she really doesn't want to say. Everyone catches on quickly to her sensitivity. They turn to Dipper for answers instead, who offers them nothing but the fact that he found her in the woods near the gas station at the edge of town.

It's not enough, though. He can see it in all of their eyes, especially Dad's. The happiness at Mabel's surprise return is of course still thick in the air, but it's obvious no one can really get around how she clearly looks like she's been to hell and back. Stick thin, fragile and dirty, basically dressed in what looks like an old sack... scrapes and tiny cuts dotted along her skin... an unnerving looking bruise marring her delicate throat. If Dipper was in their place, he wouldn't be able to get around it, either.

Dad gently wipes the dirt from Mabel's face with a warm washcloth. Stan sets food in front of her, but she can only manage a few bites. The question of whether or not they should take her to the hospital arises right away, but both twins immediately start protesting against it. Dipper argues that he checked her for major injuries when he'd first found her so she'd be okay here for a little while. Mabel cries that she doesn't want to go anywhere else, or see anyone else, right now she just wants to be with her family, all she wants to do is be with her family. In the end, it's probably her watery eyes that solidify the decision to wait until morning to take her, when Mom arrives.

When a trembling Mabel curls up in the armchair to have as much of a reunion as she can with their mom via phone call, Dipper is finally cornered by their dad and asked for the full story, and it's then that he realizes just how flimsy his lies really are.

"...You're saying she was just wandering there on the outskirts of the woods? Alone?" Dad repeats, looking skeptical.

A bead of sweat trickles down his temple. "Y-yeah. Yeah, pretty much. She was pretty coherent when I found her. All she would say about how she got there was that someone drove through, dropped her off at that gas station, and just, like, left her there. It's bizarre."

"They just left her there?" His father asks, taken aback. "But why would they... did she say who, or—"

"No, she didn't say anything about where she's been."

"This doesn't make any sense, Dipper. What happened to your face? Why are you just as banged up as her?"

"I'm not just as banged up as her, I'm fine. We took the shortcut through the

woods and I tripped and fell on my face in the hurry to get her back safe. I mean yeah, taking a rock to the face wasn't pleasant but it's really no big deal."

His dad's scrutinizing gaze drills into him, and then there's a firm hand on his shoulder. "Dipper, why aren't you telling me everything?"

"I'm telling you what I know, Dad. I swear."

There's another period of intense staring, and Dipper is on the verge of melting into the floor when Dad sighs and relents, taking his hand away, even though he still doesn't look like he's totally buying it. "Well... lucky you were over there tonight, then," is all he says before walking back over to be with Mabel, and Dipper can't tell if his words sound more suspicious or grateful... has to be grateful, right?

His sweaty hands find their way into his pockets as Dipper watches Mabel weep into the phone receiver, Dad's arm around her. It doesn't look like she's going to be done anytime soon. Now might be a good time to clean himself up, go ahead and get rid of some of the things that are only drawing attention to himself. He excuses himself and retreats to the hall, allowing his limp to return as soon as he's out of sight. When he reaches the bathroom he quickly strips down and steps in the shower, washing away all the filth and the blood, ignoring the stinging protests of his body, assessing the damage left behind. His back is starting to turn all sorts of colors and his knee has swollen up pretty badly, but at least the marks on his neck don't look as severe as he thought they would. Still, nothing he can do about the bruise on his face. A surge of hatred flashes through him. That nasty woman-creature hit him *hard*, man.

Dipper ties a towel around his waist, staring into the exhausted face of his reflection. There's an uneasy knot still caught in his stomach. He knows the conversation he just had with his father isn't over. And sticking to his guns is only going to get harder once Mom gets here, and his parents start double teaming him for answers. Even harder once he's sitting at a table and staring into the serious eyes of Detective Hurd, expected to contribute truthful information to the official statement for a fairly high-profile missing person case. There's so much to consider. So much to think about, in such a short period of time. And he's so *tired*.

As he bandages up his knees, Dipper finally relents, allowing his brain to let

it go for the night (well, as much as his anxiety ever allows him to let things go). Just... worry about it in the morning. Right now there's only one thing he really cares about, only one thing worth thinking about, anyway. And even after this insane day, it still hasn't totally sunk in.

Opening the medicine cabinet, Dipper rummages around inside until his fingers close around what he's looking for. A small smile curves his lips as he looks down at the object in his hand, one of the many things in this shack that used to twist up his insides, but now makes him feel light and airy.

An old, hot pink toothbrush.

He washes it out and sets it on the sink next to his, a tiny rush of air entering his lungs as the thought hits him for the hundredth time.

She's back. His sister is *back*.

## Part 19

For the longest time, Mabel can only stare vacantly into the reflective glass, fighting hard to get a firm grasp on the fact that the person staring back is... *her*. But it's difficult to make the connection.

Her old burlap dress crumpled at her feet, the teenaged girl stands naked in front of the bathroom mirror, leaning forward over the sink, head cocked slightly at her odd reflection. She occasionally brings fingers up to limply poke and prod at her face. A cool summer's night breeze flutters through the curtains of the open window, chilling her bare skin and sending a shiver down her spine.

Most of her body is covered in a dingy layer of dirt, but a good amount of paleness shines through on her face from where her father had lovingly wiped the grime away with a wet towel earlier. The glare of the overhead light on the pasty whiteness of her skin is blinding, clashing with her dark stringy hair to frightening levels, so she's forced to blink, and the Mabel living inside the glass blinks too.

It's scary, how much her own face surprises her. It's not like she didn't know her regular old human Mabel face had always been there, in a way at least (or did she, towards the end?), but... well. The only face she's seen regularly in the last mini-eternity is Mama's. And she's Mama's baby. *Was* Mama's baby.

So when she'd finally sucked in a breath and looked in the mirror after deliberately hiding from it for a minute or five, was she half expecting to see a miniature mole person standing there instead, face covered in wiry hair, beady little eyes glaring back at her?

She swallows.

*Possibly.*

She almost jumps out of her skin when a knock reverberates through the wood of the bathroom door, and not long after does Wendy's voice accompanies it. "Hey, Mabel, everything okay in there?"

"Yes," she softly calls back, finally tearing her eyes away from her



reflection.

“You sure you don’t want me to come in there with you? It’s really not a problem, buddy.”

Ugh, why does everybody seem to think she can’t even handle bathing herself? She *can*, she knows she can if she just... takes her time with everything. “No, I’m okay, thanks.”

Wendy pauses a moment before speaking again, keeping her voice light and friendly. “...Okay, well, I’ll be right outside the door so just yell if you need help with finding anything, or... anything.”

Mabel answers her thanks again before crouching down and opening the cabinet under the sink to find her washcloth exactly where she left it. A grimy thumb runs over the little red heart sewn into the scratchy fabric, that tickling sensation of recognition sparking through her brain again as yet another long forgotten object places itself back in her mind. Finding things and doing things while making her way around the Shack has been less of a difficult experience and more of an overwhelming, mechanical one; it’s like she doesn’t have to work hard to think about these things, they just *are*. She can’t really recall things at will, but her feet and hands will take her where she needs to go, almost as if they remember, but she doesn’t. It’s a peculiar feeling.

It happens again when she steps in the tub and her hand turns on the shower of its own accord, squeaking the rickety temperature dial directly to that one magic mark between sub-zero cold and broiling hot. A tiny smile comes to Mabel’s face. It’s nice to know that some things haven’t changed at all.

Warm water rains down around her and for the first fifteen minutes she allows herself to just stand there and revel in the feeling of her first shower in three years, because hot diggity wow, she had no idea how much she needed this. A steady stream of dirt starts gathering at her feet and disappearing down the drain, and her exhausted muscles rejoice as all kinds of tension she didn’t even realize was there until right now trickles away with it.

Next she takes her old washcloth in a determined fist. Scrubbing away years’ worth of filth feels more like washing away a second skin. Slowly but surely, more blindingly white skin with blooms of purple appears underneath, until there’s a ghost standing in her place when she looks down at her scrawny body.

She does the same treatment for her hair, shampooing it over and over until it no longer feels like a crusty weight on top of her head.

When the second skin is finally gone, and Mabel at last finishes her scrub-a-thon, she finds herself sinking down to the floor of the tub, thin arms coming around to hug her knees to her chest as warm water rains down over her head, a few tears escaping down the drain along with the last of the dirt. She rests there until the water starts to turn chilly and a concerned Wendy is once more calling to her through the door.

“Nope, everything’s A-ok in here, I’ll be out in a sec!” Mabel calls back. Thankfully she manages to avoid the tremor that wants to enter her voice. Heaving herself up, she mumbles out a fatigued, “*Blargh*,” and turns off the water.

She’s not sure what her problem is. Being back where she belongs is supposed to be a fully happy occasion, right?

*Get it together, Mabel...*

Like all the usual comforts, the fluffy clean towel feels foreign against her skin. She dries herself off slowly, eyeing the pile of clothes on the floor that Wendy handed to her earlier. Somebody had run out to the store to at some point and bought her a pack of plain white undergarments along with a white undershirt and some purple sleep shorts. But on top of the pile is a plaid flannel that looks like it’s been worn before; she only has to pick it up and bring it to her nose for a second to realize that this is a piece of Dipper’s wardrobe. A fuzzy feeling flutters around in her stomach and she smiles. She should’ve known. It looks like something he would wear.

Filled with a sudden and powerful urge to see him, Mabel begins quickly pulling on the clothes. Sheesh, how long has she been in here, anyway?

Once again she finds herself in front of the mirror, this time with a comb in her hand as she wipes the steam opaqued glass clear. Her heart speeds up at the sight of the clean version of herself. Leaning even further over the sink and towards this ghostly mirror-person, she runs a hand along her jaw and through her wet hair. *Nope, nopenopenope.*

This is just plain tripping her out. Mabel averts her eyes, unable to look

anymore. Hastily tugging the comb through her tangled hair a few times, she flies out of the bathroom, hugging Wendy goodnight and heading to do the same for Dad and Stan and Soos. They tell her that Mom should be here too by the time she wakes up, and the thought of feeling her mother's arms around her again puts the tears from the shower out of her mind. When Mama's face pops up in her brain, she pushes it back down.

Her dad catches her yawning, and tells her that Dipper is upstairs, and that he'll take care of anything she needs tonight. A tiny thrill jolts through her. She's going to be sleeping in her old attic bedroom tonight with her brother across from her, just like she used to. This is all so surreal.

Dad offers to walk her up, but Mabel opts to go alone, assuring him that she'll be fine. When she eases through the door to the attic, Dipper is lying in his bed, one leg doing that nervous-bouncy-thing, his eyes fixed on the slanted roof overhead. At the creak of the door his head jerks up, and a second later he's on his feet, a nervous hand running through his hair as Waddles gallops over from his spot on the rug and jumps into her waiting arms. "H-hey," he says, his voice high. "Everything go all right? You look... you look, um, cleaner."

Dipper's red face is lost on her as she nods, distracted by Waddles' excited greeting, cooing and smothering her pig's chubby pink face in kisses. Once the two of them *do* make eye contact though, he has her breath catching in her throat.

It's just so... it's so heckin' *weird*.

Mabel knows the guy standing there wringing his hands and staring at her—with eyes so huge it's pretty funny, actually—is Dipper through n' through, one-hundred-percent her twin brother, the boy she grew up with, who she loves, who found and rescued her today against all the odds. But at the same time, he's really... not. The Dipper she remembers was a little shorter than her, slim shoulders, round face, dorky little shorts covering up a pair of chicken thighs... And holy meow, this boy here in the room with her is *not* that Dipper, and it's finally hitting her, now that everything has calmed down and they're all alone.

Mabel notices his eyes glancing over her and from the look on his face all these crazy changes between them are finally hitting him, too. Gosh, she really wishes he would stop looking at her like that. Especially since if that mirror

wasn't lying before, her looks right now are nothing to be wound up about. Aw fudge, is she blushing? Why is she *blushing*? Ugh, this is dumb. And why has it been such a long time since either of them has said anything? She dips her head down to hide her face in the top of Waddles' head under the premise of wanting to do more cooing. This is Dipper, for crying out loud. Why is she at a loss for words?

Her hair is dry enough now for her loose curls to start reforming, and she's on the verge of sticking one of the short curls in her mouth when Dipper decides he's had enough of the silence, warmly holding his arms out over his sides. "Yo, Mabel. Could really go for a not-so-awkward sibling hug right about now. You in, or what?"

The curl in between her fingers drops and Mabel smiles, relaxing. "Well *this* girl could go for like two thousand of those, so whadda you think?"

They end up walking towards each other at the same time, meeting in the middle. She gently lowers her pig down until all four hooves have hit the ground, and then she's in his arms again and everything feels like it's going to be okay. They hold each other equally tightly, neither giving any signal that they're planning on letting go anytime soon, leaving Mabel wondering if tears are going to well up in her eyes *every* time she hugs her bro from now on... because if the amount of times they've hugged today are any indication, that really seems to be the case.

Turning her face into his neck, she laughs as she feels him breathe in against her damp hair. "Woah there pal, was that a hair sniff?"

"It was not."

"Uh huh." Mabel pulls back to look at his face but he doesn't let her go, keeping his hands on her back. The smile on his face is so *intoxicating*, it's like her heart has never felt so light. "Oh and also, what is this nonsense here?" She says in mock outrage, bringing up her palm to skim it back and forth over the tops of their heads, accenting their new height difference. "I had science on my side, man! I demand a regrowth."

Dipper laughs. "*Not* sure that's possible. Sorry alpha-twin, what's done is done."

“Boo! I’m callin’ shrinky-growy crystal interference.”

“Nope, just my awesome genes. Plus I’ll have you know that *I* have been drinking my milk every day.”

“Milk in your Count Chocula doesn’t count.” Mabel giggles as different words and memories pour back into her head just by bantering with him. Oh man, she’d forgotten about delicious sugary cereal until just now. Tomorrow morning she’s going to pour herself a bowl that’s at *least* a foot high. No more brown mush. Life is good.

“Okay, just my awesome genes then.” Dipper smirks, trailing his hands up and down her back almost imperceptibly so, yet the light touch still causes her heart do tiny little flips inside her chest. “Nice shirt, by the way.”

“Yeah, it is, isn’t it.” Bringing her sleeve covered hands to her cheeks, Mabel squishes them together, poking out her tongue at him. “Wendy stole it for me, that alright with you, bro?”

She’d meant the question as a joke, but for some reason it flusters him. “No—I mean yeah, it looks cool on you. You can keep it.” He clears his throat, his eyes darting around before landing back on hers, his hands falling to his sides. It finally dawns on her how close his face is and Mabel unintentionally starts to examine her brother’s different features, her eyes moving between the harsher angle of his jaw, the scratches and bruises on his cheeks, his chapped lips, the faint brown hairs sprinkled along his chin. Great, there’s that flippy feeling in her stomach again. She bites her lip, looking away from him. Oh boy.

*Alright* already, Dipper looks different—now stop staring at him like he’s got glittery stickers stuck all over his face! So he’s sixteen now. Big whoop. That shouldn’t be intimidating or preoccupying at all, because hey, so is she. Although... being sixteen years old really is kind of a weird thought, in her case. Even though Mama celebrated her ‘birthday’ once a year, Mabel hasn’t really given much thought to her age, because no matter how much time inched by, down in that burrow things always stayed exactly the same.

Something attached to the wall behind Dipper’s head catches her eye, and she steps out of his grasp, moving her hand down to grip his and bring him with her as she goes to get a closer look. Upon further inspection she discovers that it’s a poster, about her. A picture of her younger self—sitting side by side with

Waddles—grins at her goofily, one small hand making bunny ears behind Waddles' head, the rest of the paper covered in text with the word 'Missing' at the top in thick black capital letters.

Dipper says nothing while Mabel just stares at the sight, noticing a second later that another poster with her picture, this one titled '*Have You Seen Me?*' hangs right next to it. Her eyes continue to scan along the wall, next landing on a newspaper article topped with the words "*Missing Oregon Child Sighted at Washington Rest Stop*", and then there's another similar article next to that one, and another next to that one, and...

Sweet moses. How did she not notice all this until now?

Mabel can't help but start walking in a slow, awed circle as she finally takes in the room, still dragging Dipper around with her. The walls are covered in papers, newspaper clippings, maps, photos, drawings. Completely covered. From the chipped baseboards to as high as he could reach. And as she looks closer, squinting in the dim light, she comes to realize with a skip in her heartbeat that it's all about her. All of it. The mix of chaos and precise organization is so plainly Dipper, it's ridiculous. Her eyes start to well up again.

"You were looking for me."

The words catch him off guard, and he just stares at her, his mouth opened slightly in a halted attempt to speak. She's just looked away from him and gone back to swiveling her head around the room when he manages to say something.

"Well, yeah." The hand that's not holding hers moves to rub at his neck. "Of course I was."

Mabel shakes her head, her eyes leaving the walls again to land on her brother's. "No, I mean... you were *really* looking for me." Her voice catches on the last syllable. She purses her lips tightly. He moves towards her slightly in response, seemingly on the verge of taking her into his arms again, but for some reason decides against it at the last second.

"There was never any other option," he says, pausing to exhale. "It was either keep looking and hoping, or... or do nothing, and I... couldn't do that."

She swallows, her mind whirring. But... she was gone for so *long*. And

then... all those nights she spent alone in the dark, trying to drown out the persistent little voice in her head, the one that kept whispering that they'd all probably already forgotten about her... that he'd forgotten about her... that it was for the best...

Mabel blinks rapidly, her lip wobbling as her focus shifts from Dipper's eyes to the wall behind him and back. A mixture of compassion and fierce appreciation for her twin surges through her and she lets go of his hand to pull him into another hug herself, feeling him quickly cling back. "Well I'm really glad you didn't, Dip," she murmurs into his shoulder, trying to swallow down the huge lump in her throat.

The sound of snorting meets her ears and they move apart enough to look down at their feet, where Waddles scrabbles hopefully at their legs. Mabel sniffs loudly before reaching down to pick him up with a watery giggle. "And so is Waddles. Aren'tcha, Waddles?" She turns him out to face Dipper, shimmying him back and forth and lowering her voice a pitch. "I am super-doooper happy that Uncle Dippingsauce found my mommy, yes I am. Oink oink."

Dipper's eyes are a little red and watery as well but he laughs anyway, reaching out to scratch Waddles behind the ears. "Yeah, well. I expect you to remember that the next time you're thinking about eating one of my paperbacks for dinner, pal."

"Oh, he will. He definitely will." She hugs Waddles to her chest as she and Dipper share a smile. Their hands find one another's again as she strolls over to her old corner of the room. Since it's the only part of the attic that's not cluttered with stuff about her disappearance, she's kind of drawn to it.

Her furniture and things look almost pristine, as if not a single piece of it had been moved since she was last standing in this room, and if it weren't for the dingy layer of dust on everything, from just looking at it she might have thought she'd never even been gone at all. Mabel's eyes fall onto the stuffed tiger peeking out from underneath the pink covers, and a happy noise bursts out of her mouth. "Eeep! Fonzie!" She lifts the pig tucked under her arm up to peck the top of his head before letting him down onto the mattress, then taking her old toy in her hand instead and bringing it to her nose to take a long, loving whiff.

Dipper snorts. "Haven't lost your love of sniffing the Fonze, I see."

She grins over at him joyfully. “Smells like home.”

At that Dipper’s smirk softens and he squeezes her hand. Mabel drags him around to the end of her bed where she spots a giant bag of sour gummy koalas sitting on top of a discolored trunk. Dang. Her stuff really *has* been left untouched.

“Huh. Think those are still edible?”

Dipper makes a face. “Um... I wouldn’t.”

She nudges the bag to the floor with her foot, finally registering what’s in the trunk underneath.

“Omigosh, my sweaters!” Mabel squeals gleefully, falling to her knobby knees in front of the trunk that obviously hasn’t been opened in years and setting Fonzie down next to her. After a few attempts she finally gets it unlatched and throws open the top, immediately diving her arms in to pull out colorful garment after colorful garment, delighted giggles escaping pouring from her lips. She turns to look up at Dipper with a wide smile and a rainbow’s worth of sweaters in her arms. “Mama took the sweater I was wearing when I fell pretty much as soon as she started taking care of me,” she says offhandedly, “I can’t wait to start wearing real clothes again.”

His smile falters a bit when she mentions Mama, but otherwise he’s grinning as widely as she is. For a moment they just stare happily at one another before Mabel lets the heap in her arms roll onto the wooden floorboards, twisting back around to dig through the trunk again. Her hands latch onto a bright purple sweater near the bottom and she pulls it out, fondly noting the red and orange winking chameleon wearing a monocle and a top hat that’s knitted onto the front. She laughs out as she addresses the little fabric animal, getting to her feet. “Well *hello* there Sir Sanford, never thought I’d get to wear you again.”

On a whim she pulls the sweater over her head and tugs the hem down as far as it will go, which turns out, isn’t very far at all. What was once more than enough room for full-on sweatertown now only reaches halfway down her forearms and barely meets the top of her shorts. And the thing is tight—like, super uncomfortably tight—especially around her upper body. Mabel tilts her head down to look at the colorful chameleon stretched across her chest, her mouth pursed to one side in faint surprise. At the same time, she’s not sure what



she was expecting, since three years is a lot of growin' time.

Three years.

It's still pretty hard to believe.

When she looks up again she catches Dipper in the act of hastily shifting his gaze back up to her face, his ears tinged pink. There's another brief skip in her heartbeat but she chooses to ignore it, meekly shrugging her shoulders and bouncing her wrists against her thighs. "Guess I won't be wearing these anymore," she laughs feebly.

"Well now you have an excuse to make a bunch of new sweaters," Dipper says with an affectionate smile, and she can't help but smile back. Peeling the tight article of clothing up and over her head, she tosses it back in the trunk, gingerly bending down to do the same for the rest of her old creations strewn all over the floor. She can feel Dipper silently hovering beside her as she rights herself, taking her stuffed tiger with her, and stretches out a foot to nudge the chest closed. When she pads over to the side of her bed to pet a snoozing Waddles and pick at her pink bedspread, Dipper follows, never more than three feet away. Almost like a big, brother-y magnet, Mabel thinks with a giggle. She yawns and a couple of seconds later there's a hand on her back as she rubs a fist into her eye.

"Tired?" Dipper asks sincerely, but then screws up his face into a grimace. "Okay, dumb question, of course you are."

"No duh, bro." That jolly spark of wit that used to coat her every word is slowly returning to her and it's strange, being able to say whatever she wants whenever she wants. "Aren't you? We ah, kinda had a busy day there." He gives her a look as if to say *'well that's the understatement of the century,'* and she just grins at him.

"Yeah, I could definitely go for some Z's. My knee is sorta killing me." There's a lingering pause before he continues. "So... did you want to..." He starts to rock on the balls of his feet, while Mabel swipes distractedly at the layer of dust on her pillow with one inquisitive finger. "...Uh." Dipper's would-be sentence finally trails off into ever-so-tactful nothingness, his eyes shifting to the side and his hand coming up to awkwardly scratch the side of his nose. Meanwhile Mabel is busy thinking about how cold and dusty her old bed looks,

and how sleeping in it by herself tonight doesn't sound the least bit appealing...

Hm. He'd say yes if she asked, wouldn't he? Psh... of course he would. He's never turned her down in the past. Plus he doesn't seem to be too keen on being anywhere but right next to her side since they'd been reunited. It wouldn't be weird, right? Even if things are a little different, now... gosh, she really can't get over how much taller he's gotten.

In the end Mabel tentatively asks, "Would it be okay if I..." just as Dipper nervously offers, "Would you want to...?" The twins blink at each other before dissolving into comfortable laughter.

"Okay then, we seem to be on the same page here," Dipper says, trying to stifle the obviously pleased expression that wants to take over his face.

"Seems we are. Now move along lil' dawgie, time for some shuteye." Her voice drips with a thick southern accent as she grabs the back of his shoulders and pushes him towards his bed, regretting it a second later when the sound of Mama's voice pops in her head. Ugh. She's already plagued enough by memories of her—she has to keep reminding herself—*former* surrogate mother; she really doesn't need to be causing these recollections herself.

Okay, no more accents. Shake it off, Mabel.

His bed isn't made, so when her brother gives her a flourishing welcoming gesture and an "after you sis," there's no need to pull back the sheets before bouncing in and letting her head fall onto the pillow, a long, satisfied sigh leaving her. He smiles and crawls in right after her, pulling his wrinkled blue quilt over the two of them and making sure Mabel is all tucked in and cozy before settling down himself. Unsure of how much distance he should put between them, he keeps himself crammed to one side of the bed, taking care not to accidentally graze her with an arm or a knee or a foot—a task that would be a lot easier if the two of them had been younger again. His old cot feels a lot smaller than it was the last time they had a sleepover, that's for sure.

Quickly catching on to what he's doing, Mabel turns her head to roll her eyes at him with a snort. If that dork he thinks he's going to get out of a little cuddling tonight, he is gravely mistaken, and most definitely not as smart as he claims to be. Ever since their escape she's found herself craving human touch like crazy woah, actively seeking it out from Grunkle Stan and Wendy and Soos, from Dad,

and especially—her pale cheeks get a little rosier—from her twin bro.

At her face Dipper puts on an innocent grin, giving his tenseness away with that anxious, shifty gaze of his. “What?”

She shifts to mimic his position of facing her on his side and brings forth a finger to lightly poke him in the chest. “You know you can relax if you want, I promise I’m non-toxic. Mostly.”

His ears turn red again and he avoids her eyes. “I know that... just wanted to make sure you had enough leg room.”

Pfft. He’s being so *cautious* around her, and she really wishes he would drop the act and stop treating her like a fragile little doll that could break at any moment. Enough with the doll stuff, she got plenty of that from Ma—from she-who-must-not-be-named. Can’t they just go back to the way things were before?

It suddenly occurs to her that the road to achieving some semblance of normalcy again is going to be a lot rockier than she thought. She bites her lip, trying with all her might to squelch the lost feeling swirling around in her tummy.

Deciding it’s up to her to break the ice, Mabel latches onto the sleeves of his shirt and pulls him towards her until their knees are touching. “Or we could just share the leg room?” She makes a solemn face, her voice dropping. “It’s an extremely groundbreaking idea, I know. You’ll have to bear with me.”

Although he grins and makes a “pshh” sound in response to her mild sarcasm, Dipper still seems apprehensive about the closer contact at first. But he doesn’t flinch when she presses their feet together, and grips back tightly when she slips one of her hands into his, so the churning feeling in her gut is thankfully quelled a bit.

“Geez, your feet are freezing,” he gripes.

“Yeah, so are yours. Here, we can warm each other up.” She tries to create some friction by moving her tiny feet rapidly against his larger ones, but mostly ends up just sort of lightly kicking him in the shins, prompting him to retaliate in the same way. They laugh, caught up in a mini-foot war until a stray jab from Mabel connects with Dipper’s bruised knee and he flinches, a quiet hiss of pain

coming from between his teeth.

“Ack. Your knee? Aw, I’m sorry Dipper, I didn’t—”

He quickly cuts off her worried babbling, shrugging his shoulders and shaking his head, probably overdoing it with the nonchalance. “No no, it’s fine, I’m fine. Honestly, nowhere close to the worst pain I’ve felt today, haha. Plus, hey, my feet are actually pretty warm now.”

He’s trying to get her to drop her look of remorse but she can’t, because even though he’s smiling, under the covers Mabel can still feel his injured leg trembling just slightly against hers.

“Sorry, Dip,” she says again, quieter this time.

“Seriously, don’t worry about it... uh...” Dipper’s voice trails off as he goes cross-eyed trying to follow the path of the finger swiftly closing in on his face. She brings her index finger up between his eyebrows and glides it down his nose, which is just as pink and adorable as she remembers. When she reaches the end of it she taps the tip of gently, murmuring a “bop” for added effect.

Originally that’s all she’d planned to do when she’d followed through on the impulse to touch his face, but it’s like her stubborn ol’ hand has developed a mind of its own, because now it’s making its way across his cheek and his eyelids are fluttering a tiny bit. Oh well... no stopping it now. There’s a little white scar near the corner of his eye that she’s never seen before, and she trails her fingertips over it, wondering how it got there. She also wonders if the dark circles underneath his eyes are always *this* dark. The list of things she wonders about new Dipper just keeps getting longer and longer.

By the time she’s stroking her way down his jaw his face is noticeably red, and judging by the heat radiating from her own cheeks, it’s probably safe to say that hers is too. He’s staring at her with that look in his eyes that makes her heart speed up, the same look he’s been giving her on-and-off since their eyes first locked in the underground marketplace today.

Maybe she should stop? Nah... these feelings have to be natural for two sibs who’ve been separated for so long, right? They feel natural to her, at least.

Mabel doesn’t dwell on any potentially awkward thoughts for long, suddenly

occupied by the soft hairs that are underneath her fingertips.

“So, Old Man River.” She giggles softly, “When did all this manly-male-man facial hair happen for you?”

It takes him a second to blink out of wherever his brain was, and he finally answers with a flustered laugh. “Oh—yeah. Puberty n’ stuff, man. It’ll do crazy things to you.”

“I can see that.” She giggles again and bites her lip, gently scratching her nails over his meager amount of scruff, inadvertently causing her brother’s Adam’s apple to bob heavily in his throat. “Weird.”

“Weird?” He raises an eyebrow. “Like stupid weird?”

“No, like funny in a cute way weird.”

“Oh. Well then that’s acceptable I guess.”

A shy smile spreads across his face, making her stomach do flip-flops for a whole different reason. The feeling scares her a little. Okay, might be time to dial it back some, if her warm cheeks are any indication. She gives the shaggy hair on top of his head a hearty ruffle before bringing her hand back down between them, laying it on top of his.

“You just haaad to go and grow up on me, didn’t you, Dip.” There’s a forlorn note in her voice that she hadn’t intended to be there.

“Hey, not fair, you did the same thing to me.” Dipper is quick to react with a semi-joking tone. “Ha... I mean geez, Mabel, have ya looked in the mirror lately? You’re like—you look—” His brain seems to catch up with him and he stops talking, squinting at the wall behind her head.

An image of the skinny girl with the dull hair and the colorless complexion she’d seen in the mirror earlier pops up in her mind, and Mabel averts her eyes. “...Liiike I’ve been living in a dirt pile for like a jillion years?” she offers, trying to make it sound like a joke but not sure how well she succeeded.

“Uh, no.” His eyes snap back over to her face and he frowns. “I was gonna say pretty.” Right after the words leave his mouth he swallows and immediately

starts backtracking. “You know, I just mean like in a uh, in a different way. Than before. Y’know? You look—you look just fine. So don’t worry, about anything like... yeah.”

Oh. Well that was unexpected. Aw dang it, and now she can’t help the huge smile that’s stretching across her face.

“Daww.” Mabel tries to brush off the compliment, lightly punching his shoulder and blowing a weak raspberry. But the bubble of emotion that’s been floating around in her chest has suddenly tripled, maybe even quadrupled in size, and she feels like she might burst, because she’s realizing all over again that she’s *free*. The impossible has happened and she’s back in her attic bedroom at the Shack and he’s right *here*, right next to her and looking at her all cute and earnest, like she’s the best thing since sliced cheese, but he’s so so wrong, *he’s* the one who’s the best thing since sliced cheese, and—*and*—holy friggin’ ravioli, all she wants to do is throw her arms around his neck and never ever let go, because she needs to make absolute sure that this is all real, that it’s not all some insanely realistic dream, that she’s not just going to wake up in the dark again—

She’s a second away from propelling forward with every intention of permanently latching herself to her brother and telling him about all the thoughts and fears that are whizzing around unchecked in her head, but to her surprise, he beats her to the punch, squeezing her hand.

“I can’t believe you’re really here,” he blurts. “God, I missed you.” Everything she just wanted to say to him flies away from her, because his voice is thick and his eyes are glassy and her throat wants to close up at the sight. “I-I missed you so fucking much, Mabel.”

“Are you kidding,” she shoots back, her voice catching. “A-and ya think I didn’t miss you?” She fails to mention the fact that she’d missed him so much that it hurt to think about him. That she’d deliberately tried to bury him down deep enough so she wouldn’t have to feel that ceaseless *ache* anymore.

Dipper shakes his head against the pillow, his mouth trembling. “I thought... I thought you were... this whole time you were right under my feet and I—I *almost*...” His breathing becomes uneven and he’s forced to stop talking, struggling to take in sharp inhaleds.

Mabel makes a vain attempt to slow down the rapid rate at which tears are gathering in her eyes, making the outline of his face all fuzzy. “But you didn’t, you still found me,” she gives him a watery smile, tugging his hand to hold it against her cheek.

“I’m sorry it took me so long,” She watches as big fat droplets start to escape sideways down his face, disappearing into the pillow. “I’m sorry that this happened to you. I-I’m sorry I yelled at you that day, I shouldn’t’ve yelled and I’m so sorry Mabel, I’m so so sorry—” His voice breaks, dissipating into a choppy whisper and he takes his hand out of her grasp to pull her into an embrace, holding her head under his chin and taking in a shuddering breath.

The sound of him sniffing above her, the deafening pound of his heartbeat pressed against her ear... it fractures her heart into little tiny pieces. He thinks all of this was his fault? No, that’s not right, that’s not right at all...

“Dipper... you’re not still thinking about that dumb fight, are you?” Mabel sniffs against his shirt, her voice muffled. She’d forgotten what they were even fighting about a long time ago, and she has no intention of recalling it now.

“Kinda been thinkin’ about it every day for the last two years, ten months... twenty-four days,” Dipper says weakly, and she feels him hold her closer. Mabel finally chokes up too, wiggling an arm around him to grasp the back of his shirt, her tears soaking the front of it.

“Let’s please please never be apart this long ever again,” she eventually manages to hiccup out between sobs. “A-agreed?”

“Agreed,” he whispers brokenly into her hair.

The talking stops after that, both twins lying curled in one another’s fierce grips. Only the sounds of hushed cries and sharp breaths can be heard throughout the dim attic, neither of them bothering to hold back anymore of what was probably a long time coming.

Eventually cries turn into hiccups and hiccups fade into ragged breathing and after a while Dipper falls silent, followed shortly by Mabel. It’s even longer before either of them move, the emotional exertion and the sheer exhaustion of the day settling in on them.

Dipper sits up a little and wipes his eyes, twisting to turn off the lantern, Mabel releasing her hold on him and scooting back to her side of the bed. Soon the only light in the room is the triangular patch of moonlight shining onto the floor. When Dipper groggily rolls back over to face Mabel again, she smiles wearily at him, a smile he returns. Her heart feels a lot less heavy now, and it's pretty obvious he's feeling the same thing.

She knows that she'll probably be asleep as soon as she closes her eyes, but she still finds the energy to pick up her head and move close enough to touch a small peck to Dipper's cheek, one that's still sticky with tear stains.

"Love you, Dip," she whispers before pulling away and resting her head back on the pillow.

He answers back with a faint, yet sincere, "Love you too," causing the tired smile to stay on her face even after they've closed their eyes. This feeling of safety and comfort is foreign to her, but... it's good. She could definitely get used to this.

For the first night in years, Mabel's guard falls away and she lets go, drifting off to the sound of her twin's breathing.

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She's having a really, really good dream.

Or at least, Mabel thinks she is. An overpowering warmth consumes her, making it impossible to move, which is just fine with her.

There's a presence beside her... *Dipper*. A sluggish smile comes to her lips. He's still here, right here beside her. The thought that he is feels so alien, so mind-boggling, so good and comforting and wonderful... man, Dipper is... the cheese. Sliced cheese. Cheese? Why is she thinking about cheese? Go back to thinking about Dipper. Dipper... she missed him so, so much. Did she ever remember to tell him that? She did, right?

Better tell him again, just in case.

"*I missed you...*" Mabel's dreamy mumble comes breaking through the silence of the attic, then she forgets saying anything at all.



Mmm... cheese.

Mabel doesn't notice when the other body lying in the bed with her stirs, causing the bed frame to creak. Everything goes still again for a bit, but soon there are fingers in her hair, wandering through the short locks a few times before cautiously tucking it behind her ear. She lets out a long, satisfied hum, snuggling deeper into the fluffy pillow.

Careful, shallow breaths meet her ears, getting nearer and nearer until she can feel their rhythmic warmth meeting her face. And the room is so quiet, but Mabel thinks she might've just heard her name, a hint of desperation tingeing the tiny whisper. The springs in his lumpy mattress squeak as he shifts closer, his fingers gently trailing along her arm; she doesn't move. Her heart thumps a little harder in her chest, but other than that, she doesn't react to his timid movements at all, because her limbs are leaden and immobile, and everything feels so fuzzy that it's really hard for her to tell if she's awake or not.

Wait... *is* she dreaming right now...? If she is, she doesn't care enough to figure it out. Does she want to be? Would it even matter?

Something is telling her to keep her eyes closed, so she does, although she's not even sure she could open them if she wanted to. Nothing happens for a while. Mabel is only a few seconds from full-blown unconsciousness when soft, uncertain lips brush against her slightly parted ones. Almost like a reflex, her own lips close into a slight pucker and she finds herself returning the gentle pressure. At her response Dipper inhales sharply through his nose and pushes closer, and the pressure grows a tiny bit, the hand on her arm moving up to touch her cheek. She sighs out a content, sleepy noise. She can't remember the last time she had a dream about kissing her brother like this, but it's warm and nice as it ever was.

Their little kiss is lingering, but at the same time it doesn't feel like any time has passed at all before he backs away and her lips feel cold again. Blearily, she blinks open her eyes to find Dipper watching her, inches away on the pillow, his face plagued with anxiety. His lips tremble as if he's dying to say something, but he stays silent, his thumb tracing over the corner of her mouth. He slowly retracts his hand. There's a fresh pair of damp streaks trailing faintly down his cheeks.

He's... sad? Why is he sad? They're finally together again and this bed is so comfy and warm, nothing at all like her pile of moss and leaves back home. Wait, *no*, no Mabel, that's not home anymore. *This* is home. Grasp the concept already.

Gosh, it feels like there are weights on her eyelids...

Whether she's dreaming or not, she doesn't want Dipper to be sad about anything. So she manages a small, drowsy smile in his direction, not waiting around for his reaction before letting her eyes fall closed again and huddling against him. His arm hesitantly wraps around her, the tips of his fingers curling slightly into her shirt at the small of her back.

Mm. He smells nice. Like the Dipper she remembers, although different in a way she can't really explain. It's unreal how much better this is than when Mama used to call Mabel into her tight, unyielding hold and she wants to tell him this, but when she tries it comes out in the form of a barely audible mumble. Oh well...

Her arms tuck up against his chest on their own. Her last thought before everything fades out is some incoherent jumble about Dipper, and Mama, and how she missed having such nice dreams and then, nothing at all. Her breath becomes slow and rhythmic as Mabel finally succumbs to a deep sleep, leaving her brother to stare wide-eyed into the dark with a rapidly beating heart.

## Bibliography

The fic and all the art was posted on the separate tumblr blog **hide-n-seek-story.tumblr.com**, between February 2014 and June 2015.

One additional piece of artwork, done by the fan of the fic, **if you throw money at him he dances**, and re-blogged:



Sup, made a thing cause as a young artist myself you're inspirational.

Meant to be Dipper asking some old lantern inhabiting fairy's during Autumn about Mabel but you make of it what you will, that's what's amazing about you. Being able to take Alex's creation and make it your own I mean.

So how bout that cartoon incestuous relationship huh,

But that Dipper in Hide and Seek. As he becomes more desperate to find her he descends more so in to the fanciful paranormal underbelly of Gravity Falls. But at the same time he loses more of his real life. School, friends, family. Any thing to find her.

Imagine Stan entering the twins room one night to see him asleep at his desk. Mable's side completely the same but his own side trashed with papers of investigative supernatural scribbblings riddling everything. Too which Stan would pretend not to see as he covers Dipper in a blanket.

Can't wait to see what comes next, much love.